

Curriculum reform in the Arts: Dangers of a faulty model

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Introduction

Within the *New Zealand Curriculum Framework* (Ministry of Education, 1993) the Arts, comprising visual arts, music, dance, drama and literature, are designated one of seven 'Essential Learning Areas'. During a time when a new Arts Policy and an accompanying Arts Curriculum Statement are being formulated it is useful to examine what lies behind the moves for curriculum reform in the Arts. It is salient to ask, for instance, whether the moves are based on sound educational research or on ideology and political expediency.

Statements in the *New Zealand curriculum Framework* seem to contain a number of assumptions that are of concern to arts educators. These are:

- The reforms are intended to benefit all students.
- The arts share generic competencies.
- Specifying the arts as an essential learning area will help overcome previous marginalisation.
- Quality outcomes defined by competency-based subject achievement standards are appropriate for the arts.
- Integrated approaches can only benefit the learning process in the arts.

These assumptions are interconnected of course, but I wish to examine each in turn to see whether they are justified.

A critique of some NZ Curriculum Framework assumptions

Assumption 1: *Reforms are for the benefit of all*

My observations suggest that the national curriculum reforms primarily serve the interests of government and industry, and that the welfare of students 'plays a very second fiddle'. For instance, in justifying Arts as an essential learning area, the Hon. Lockwood Smith, previous Minister of Education, wrote in the *Arts Advocate* in 1993 that it:

makes good economic sense to do so. In the rapidly expanding service

sector we need people with the ability to integrate learning in different fields and to continue learning on the job.

The Minister's economic and employment considerations obviously came first. Only near the end of the article did he mention that the arts involve creativity and are part of our personal and national identity. It seems that the hidden agenda is to pay only lip service to the Arts. They are probably considered less valuable knowledge and could safely be left to last in the curriculum reform efforts. In contrast, Arts educators view the creativity and identity elements as cornerstones of Arts education for all.

Questions have to be asked about whether reforms based on market-place ideology will improve art and music education which are currently based on nationwide research and relevant teaching/learning theories. Curricula in these areas are benefiting students **now**. I hope they will not be discarded and replaced with politically-driven changes.

Assumption 2: *The arts are generic competencies*

A few people argue that the arts share common characteristics, but others, such as Best (1992), contend that while there are strong aesthetic relationships among the arts, the arts are **not** generic. Some arts such as painting, fine drawing, sculpture and printmaking possess many principles in common, but these commonalities, he argues, do not extend to arts such as music, dance and drama. Boughton (1994) agrees and as an example points out that listening to a piece of music has no literal equivalent in terms of painting. Creative interpretation and technical performance are central to the performing arts; in the visual arts they play a minor role.

The danger of assuming that the arts share generic competencies is that as the arts curriculum is squeezed for space, as has happened in Britain, administrators may decide that one art strand (no doubt the cheapest one) will suffice for arts education for our students.

Assumption 3: *Designating arts an essential learning area will help overcome previous marginalisation*

Designating the arts as an essential and compulsory 10-year learning area might appear to grant them one-seventh the teaching time and resources. However, in New Zealand, as elsewhere, there is a deep-seated belief among many parents (and some teachers) that the arts are a mere frill, an entertainment, and certainly not important like the 'basics'. Such people are ignorant of the important role that the arts play in developing personal and cultural identity, and creative, aesthetic and lateral thinking skills. This, at least, is the message from the USA. The results of a three-year

ethnographic study of music teaching in non-specialist classrooms reveal that in spite of district and state compulsory regulations, music instruction is scant (Lehman, 1988). A reason given repeatedly by teachers was pressure to teach the 'academics'. The picture in New Zealand is not too different. An Education Review Office publication on the arts reveals that of 79 school surveyed in 1994, only a third were delivering art and music programmes well. Some were not teaching the arts at all, despite the new subject syllabus being specified for these areas in 1989, that is, five years previously.

The arts may be officially designated part of the compulsory basic curriculum but this doesn't mean that they have automatically become this in practice.

Assumption 4: *Specification of standards will improve learning*

To assume that all the state has to do to improve the quality of education is to articulate standards is naive, to say the least. As Elley (1993) has clearly stated, there is no rationale for dividing each curriculum area into a particular number of evenly placed standards or levels. In terms of the arts, there is definitely no adequate data base or research to support development of level descriptors or standards in these areas. Furthermore the progressive ladder of achievement model implied by the levels is totally inconsistent with what is known about how children learn in the arts. Here children's knowledge tends to develop in clusters of concepts, haphazardly, building on previous learning with rapid spurts, side tracks, inconsistencies and misconceptions.

A further concern is that if standards were specified in the arts then the dynamic nature of the discipline would be lost since such specification is reductionist in nature. It would narrow education in the arts rather than broaden it. On the other hand, if standard statements were sufficiently general to accommodate the range of possibilities within each of the arts strands, then they would be rather meaningless. It is to be hoped that we learn from the mistake in Australia (Boughton, 1994) and do not adopt a faulted curriculum arts model for New Zealand.

Assumption 5: *Competency-based outcomes are appropriate for the arts*

The penchant for using behavioural objectives, presumably because they are crisp, unambiguous, easily written, and directed towards readily observable and assessable performance indicators, is highly problematic when it comes to the arts. Subtle outcomes integral to the arts, for instance, the aesthetic qualities inherent in aural, performance or visual activities and the creativity involved in composition, are likely to be omitted because they would be too complex to include. Across the Tasman, where the competency approach has already been tried, Boughton (1994) concluded,

The Australian effort to define student profiles in the arts has, in my

view, been a catastrophic failure. The result is a shopping list of banal arts activities - they may sound useful to teachers as a source of ideas for things to do in the classroom - but in no way represent a specification of progressive standards of performance.

What is required, Eisner (1994) maintains, are problem-solving objectives and the use of “expressive outcomes”. These are far more suitable for the arts because they are process orientated and allow for more flexibility, creativity and divergence of thought. Their strength is that they are not clearly determinable and observable in the way that the competency-based achievement movement would like. They do, however, cater for the wide diversity of development in the arts from Western artistic practices to indigenous cultural practices.

Assumption 6: *An integrated approach will improve learning*

The New Zealand curriculum Framework’s endorsement of an integrated approach to teaching the arts via topics or themes sounds fine in theory but, if the USA experience is anything to go by (Bresler, 1994), is probably an expedient way of enabling the so-called ‘academic’ subjects to minimise loss of time in an increasingly pressured curriculum.

The vital question regarding integration is whether the integrity of the disciplines involved in the separate subject strands is maintained. The danger is that the arts can too readily be used as a mere vehicle for teaching other learning areas, and thus suffer dilution of standards themselves. The seductive appeal of the integrated approach could well result in low level and superficial forms of appreciation.

Conclusion

Unless care is taken to avoid the trap of forcing the arts into the artificial mould of other curriculum areas, the arts are likely to remain marginalised, and expertise in the arts will revert to being the treasure of those advantaged with private tutoring rather than the right of all children.

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