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THE SOCIAL EDUCATOR

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Editorial
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Book Review
A review of teaching the social sciences and humanities in an Australian curriculum
Keith Crawford
Studying culture and crossing borders

Lisa J. Cary

In this issue of The Social Educator, all of the articles connect to issues of culture, difference and controversy. In “Expeditionary Teaching and Learning: One Means of Authentic Education,” by Fischer and Mazurkiewicz, the space for education moves outside classroom walls and crosses borders and boundaries in an effort to create new ways of learning about other cultures. “Developing Critical Thinking through the Discussion of Controversial Issues: Case Studies from Indonesia and Australia” by Hanurawan and Waterworth also takes us into the study of culture with a comparative approach to critical pedagogy in Australia and Indonesia. Finally, McAline and Dowden push the boundaries of the field of Social Education in the article entitled “Accommodating Environmental Controversies in the Classroom Curriculum: Too Hot to Handle or Opportunities for Deep Learning?” Finally, we are most fortunate to have a book review by Crawford of the new text Teaching the Social Sciences and Humanities in an Australian Curriculum published by Marsh and Hart in 2011. In all of these submissions, we are asked to move beyond the safe and known boundaries of teaching in Social Education. As a result, we see an interesting representation of the field as a movement for social change and cultural understanding. These articles highlight that understanding culture is a central construct in the field of Social Education.

This issue of the journal highlights the need to take a careful and complicated approach to this construct. One of the major challenges, however, when studying culture or when teaching understanding of cultural difference, is to maintain an awareness of the trap of believing we can fully know or represent others. If we do not situate our work carefully, we may add to the consumption of the other cultures and the reduction of individuals’ lives and beliefs into edible bytes (Hooks, 1992). The crisis of representation in the social sciences that occurred in the late 20th century highlights the dangers of assuming you can “real” representation (Behar, 1995). Along the same lines Popkewitz (1991) highlights this crisis of representation within the postcolonial moment that highlights issues of deterritorialisation and global homelessness. She situates the practices of First World anthropologists as privileged and colonising in their knowledge production and as a masculine way of knowing that eradicates the home as a site of belonging. (Clifford, 1986, p. 10)

However, Visweswaran (1994) approaches this from another perspective. She demands a feminist critique within the postcolonial moment that highlights issues of deterritorialisation and global homelessness. She situates the practices of First World anthropologists as privileged and colonising in their knowledge production and as a masculine way of knowing that eradicates the home as a site of belonging. (Clifford, 1986, p. 10)

Complicating images of sociocultural knowledge through an increasing awareness of multiple ways of knowing and being, and reconceptualising space and time, is one way in which educational research and the field of Social Education may benefit from this crisis in the social sciences and move beyond the hegemonic realist perspective. Thus, a way into this discussion is to draw upon postcolonial theories of knowing to help us understand how we know and how we live. Clifford (1986, 1988), Kaplan (1996), and Pratt (1992) use a variety of terms to discuss the movement of cultures and the global and local forces that shape them and enhance the kinaesthetic quality of culture.

"Cultures" do not hold still for their portraits—they are dynamic. Attempts to make them do so always involve simplification and exclusion, selection of a temporal focus, the construction of a partial self-other relationship, and the imposition or negotiation of a power relationship. (Clifford, 1986, p. 10)

A bridge, where “presenceing” begins because it captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world—the unhomeliness—that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations. To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the “unhomey” be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. (p. 9)

This move in postcolonial thought is useful in the ways it historicises First World knowledge production on the bodies of the colonised and calls for a more feminised, complicated understanding of the construction of epistemological spaces. Spivak (1993) calls this the “search of the differentially contaminated face of the absolutely other” (p. 177). She also positions Western feminist research (and knowledge production) as not innocent, and highlights the impossibility of a mere translation of the voice of others:

There is nothing necessarily meretricious about the Western feminist gaze… On the other hand, there is nothing essentially noble about the lay of the majority either. It is merely the easiest way of being “democratic” with minorities. In the act of wholesale translation into English, there can be a betrayal of the democratic ideal into the law of the strongest. (Spivak, 1993, p. 182)

Culture is neither static nor stagnant. The situated, partial and contingent epistemological assumptions that this implies are vital as there is no historical location from which a “full comparative account could be produced” (Clifford, 1997, p. 11). This suggests there is no authentic site. To this end, Bhabha (1994) and Gilroy (1993) use the post modern moment to disrupt absolutist notions of cultural location. Using concepts of “beyond” and “in-between”, Bhabha identifies a theoretically innovative move to focus on moments and processes as cultural constructions. These “in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for...
elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

The desire for authenticity is highlighted as central to the modernist project: “Articulated as a binary between pure travel and tourism, such modernisms reproduce metaphors of space and place that signal the vibrant hold of Eurocentric conceptions of national, cultural, and racial differences on supposedly progressive theories of culture and politics” (Kaplan, 1996, p. 85). She also discusses the origin of the term “politics of location” as a North American feminist articulation of difference that emphasises, interrogates and deconstructs the position, identity and privilege of whiteness (Kaplan, 1996, p. 163). Kaplan (1996) states, “The crucial questions remain: Who writes of difference, location, and travel? And who gains?” (p. 169). This move makes it possible to raise the question of privilege and position in the authorising practices of traditional representations of culture. Ultimately, Kaplan highlights the tensions and the unresolved nature of cultural hybridity, fluidity and the politics of location. Her work draws upon the contemporary literature in this area and the open-endedness of her critique aims to stimulate possibilities for a move beyond the confines of the modernist foundations of studying culture. Her work is important as an attempt to highlight the lack of consensus in the field and she suggests this presents possibilities for new ways of writing and reading culture as socio historical and political constructs.

So, as we read the outstanding articles in this issue, we can explore the ways these authors have worked within and against the difficulties of teaching, researching and theorising culture. We should always be mindful of the challenge of moving beyond the comfort we find in realist representations of cultural difference so we can continue our work towards a more complicated understanding of the field of Social Education.

References

Elaboration of Exemplification and Learning:

Arthur Teaching and Learning:

One means of authentic education

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Introduction

Education can be more than the traditional image of teacher (knowledge holder) imparting information to the student (knowledge container). Or education can be a means for becoming more human, for raising questions about the quality of our lives, for working to improve the conditions in our communities. Education may be a mechanism of social change and improvement. It has at its centre the promise and the possibility of working towards common ends, what Ayers (2004) calls,”teaching towards freedom”.

What roles might schooling and education play in democratic societies?” “With one eye on our students and another on ourselves, we attend to both the learning environment and the concentric circles of context in which our teaching is enacted. We commit to striving for true awareness of the larger world, to feeling the weight of it as we attempt to lift it up” (p.138). Education should be an integral part of the democratisation process and democracy has to be an element of education (Freire, 1999; Giroux, 1992). But as an ambiguous process, democracy is often viewed as too complex and unmanageable for the world of education (Giroux, 1992; hooks, 1998). Some argue that schools need to be carefully organised with standards, tasks and recipes—measured by the day, the year, and the class. We are faced with beliefs such that education, if it is to succeed, needs to be managed and managed in the sense of one person giving direction and others following. Or does it?

There are numerous approaches to teaching and learning goals, forms and methods of education. But shouldn’t be assumed that democratic society needs a democratic education based on an active attitude toward the process of learning and an active attitude toward the world we are living in (Dewey, 1916; Goodman, 1992; Freire, 1999; Giroux, 1992). Expedition Inside Culture is a program, originally designed in Poland, that uses expeditionary (Cousins, 1999; Bushweller, 1997; Brown, 2005), and place-based education (Williams, 2010; Nespor, 2007) to build strong, contextual teaching and learning. The program works to strengthen democracy in the schools by strengthening the connections and awareness students and teachers have of their communities and the issues located in them.

If one role for schools in democratic societies is to help prepare young people for active life, then schools need to become more democratic in order to pass on such a democratic ethos. Democracy as a political philosophy is full of possibilities and conflict. Within democratic society, education has served many purposes. These purposes for educating members of society act as the starting point for conceptualising authentic education.
What is authentic education?

Most education occurs inside walls. Four walls, a door, a few windows that might open to the fresh air and sunshine that serve as boundaries for what mainly passes as education. The strategies within the walls are well documented—teachers accused of not being prepared for the reality of the classroom; unmotivated students; parents and community members with little time to focus on the needs of a learning environment. Education, when it succeeds, breaks down those walls, opens doors and puts primacy on the connections between the activity inside the classroom and the broader world and society outside it.

Authenticity has been described (Wiggins, 1989; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998; Wiggins, 2008) as focusing on designing learning experiences that broadly connect educational practice to the real world. Our work has defined six key aspects to the conceptualisation of authenticity: rigorous expectations for student learning; skills modeled on and related to the work of individuals out in the community; knowledge continually gathered from various disciplines and fields; informed and yet question-filled deliberative communication; frequent interaction between learners and the society and its concerns; purposeful student projects that are shared with and serve the broader community’s goals and needs.

Rigor

Student learning in authentic education settings is focused on supporting all students as they are held to high expectations. These expectations help to define, not the minimum or the totality of student knowledge to be gained, but rather, high levels of understanding. These higher levels of understanding reflect the complexity of issues, events, structures and individuals that make up the sources of the reality of the world today.

Real world skills

It is a rare event to find an adult in the real world sitting at a desk being asked to silently complete a page from a workbook. The skills necessary to lead a fulfilled and productive life are the skills in use in various disciplines and fields—the job market—that represents the spectrum of adult work. These skills are the means of analysis used by the accountant to determine future expenditures; the means of communication of the blogger seeking to document events in her neighbourhood in Cairo, Egypt; the means of investigation by the engineer hoping to develop more sophisticated wind power off the coast of the Netherlands. These skills are modeled on and related to the work of individuals in the community.

Knowledge

Knowledge is not static. It is, in fact, ambiguous and ever changing as new interpretations and discoveries push us to reconsider what we know about a topic, a species, or a global issue. Authentic education works to continually gather new knowledge from a variety of disciplines and fields. This new knowledge is held up for evaluation, reflection and critique. Students are taught to question both established knowledge and new emerging findings. For example, this kind of engaged, educational work links both human rights and the sociopolitical context for various phenomena. Historically, the practices and beliefs of dominant cultures have violated the basic human needs of life, shelter, the sustenance of others (Freire, 1998). Historical references allows a perspective on the shape of the world. Participants explore the conflicts and economics that helped shape the world we are living in today.

Communication

Communication in all its many forms is essential to authentic education. Communication (spoken, written, visual, and other) is both informed by continuous flow of ideas from the knowledge societies of which we are all a part, and yet questions the same ideas through a deliberative process within a learning community.

Interaction

Frequent interaction between learners, the society, and its concerns is crucial if the educational mission is focused on rigor, communication, discipline based knowledge, and real world skills is to succeed. Students and teachers leave the four walls of their classroom, through both physical and virtual means, to see, touch, communicate, explore and investigate with and in the world around them. They encounter a world that is multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual and yet in its diversity, ultimately human. Building intercultural understanding is a piece of the puzzle. It is our recognition that we live in diverse communities that each struggle with how to define cultural communication issues and the struggle to determine which solutions to propose.

Purposeful products

Authentic education has at its core the engagement of students in the creation of purposeful products, not just the products that serve as culminating experiences, but formative products that show the initial conceptualisations all the way through final assessments of growth in understanding. These products are designed to be shared with, and serve the broader community’s goals and needs. They are the means through which educational institutions contribute to the improvement of society.

What might authentic education look like?

How do experiential and place-based learning techniques begin to work toward these elements of authentic education? We work to do this by designing programs that integrate the study of public policy issues, local history, and students’ own family and cultural identities in order to help students make connections and develop the roles they can play in society today. Our strategies have been developed over a number of years through projects and programs in Poland, Romania, the United States and Ukraine. Embedded in the program are a series of steps in the curriculum and process that use local field research, especially investigating the local history and community issues in a location outside of the home neighbourhood or local area of the participants, to raise awareness and provide planning for active involvement.

Strategies for developing student awareness and understanding of key conceptions for life in democratic societies must themselves be democratic in nature. For teachers struggling to find ways of engaging their students in negotiating meaning around key ideas such as “people as the source of government’s authority”; “third generation human rights”; and “ways of productively feeding communities while preserving the environment”, authentic education helps engage students in critical thinking strategies. Students are led to pose questions, identify problems and then analyses them in analytical ways. By communicating about their thinking, students are led through a process of deliberation during which they talk, communicate about a topic and its elements in a thoughtful manner. Democracy is dependent on the ability to participate in deliberation (Mathews, 1996) and critical thinking around significant issues means more than simple rote responses to those issues.

Expeditionary learning

Expeditionary learning (Cousins, 1999; Bushbwell, 1997; Brown, 2005) and place-based education (Williams, 2010; Nespor, 2007) provide the main instructional frameworks behind the curriculum structures developed as part of the program Expedition Inside Culture. They provide “different approaches to schooling” that “emerge from everyday life” and that allow for “knowledge, desire, practices, and research when not always in favorable circumstances, they [participants] adopt a critical stance with regard to the demand of the school establishment, the actual conditions in which populations live and the nature of the times we live in” (Unda, 2002). This method of teaching works to place students in “actual conditions in which populations live” allowing students to explore unknown communities, societies or environments. They experience circumstances that help frame and drive a “critical stance” (Brooks and Brooks, 1993) on society. These experiences can ultimately change a person’s perception of life.

Expeditionary learning seeks to develop a deeper understanding of knowledge through the development of skills of inquiry. Students are taught to raise significant questions, to seek data, information or knowledge about those questions, and engage in inquiry in the real world. After they gain new understanding they are asked to hold up these new ideas and answers to the critique of reality. This kind of learning seeks to be purposeful, meaningful students know they are seeking to prepare or accomplish something—tutor a group of preschoolers on safety and laws in their community; hike a local forest trail to investigate the history of an abandoned cemetery and help clean it; identify and record the descriptions of a local historical structure as a means of supporting its preservation. Because this type of learning utilises the students’ entire being, it is at the root “teaching for understanding”.

Nearly all expeditionary experiences teach two concepts. The first concept is the actual subject matter. The second concept is moral development—work with norms and values. Each experience focuses on four concepts: community atmosphere, personal discovery, and personal responsibility (DelBoccio & Buckler, 2000). The actual subject matter can range from content typically seen in a science class, to that in a literature, or humanities class. But we also consciously work on the level of values or intrinsic beliefs, what might be called human development. It is not one particular set of moral beliefs, but rather a whole new way of being in the world. This is what we mean by “teaching for understanding”.
We seek sights where history is contested, locations where conflict over interpretations is often quite visible. Areas are also identified because there are local issues that might serve as points of inquiry. These areas, over the last six years, have included places in Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and parts of the Midwest, United States.

The aspects of the Expedition Inside Culture model
For over nine years, a growing group of educators connected with the project have worked with teachers, young leaders, and students in school classrooms, outdoor workshops, and training programs. And while the setting has not been constant, the general parameters of the aspects of the Expedition Inside Culture (EIC) model have been. These elements have evolved, and developed over time. They are not new — instead, the elements are really a new instructional framework placed on top of the learning cycle. Research about the learning cycle has been around for some time (Atkin & Karplus, 1962). As participants move through the five broad aspects of the EIC process, they encounter a participatory educational model that seeks to create learning communities with a shared purpose (Kolb, 1984).

The term “expedition” is used as both a metaphor and as a tool. As a metaphor, participants are asked to consider the “journey” they are on — where are they heading in their life and their goal to become an active member of the knowledge society. As a tool, participants are asked to think about the steps in a journey as the steps they accomplish in the learning process.

Five broad processes and categories reflect these elements:
- Preparation for the expedition — before arrival, researching the site of the expedition, renewing written accounts of the history of phenomenon. Then, once there, working to connect with students and introduce the subject of a personal history, including participants creating time lines, sharing artifacts and family histories, working to build connections across the group and a shared sense of their humanity.
- Creating conditions for cooperation and learning — cultural communication skill development and work to create connections across the identities and perspectives in the group.
- Field research — independent and group research in heterogeneous groups. Research focuses on written sources, oral interviewing, and observations data gathering. After initial findings, the groups work to build connections from the location or phenomenon to broader geographical or concept areas.
- Reflection — once the groups and individuals develop concepts and findings, they work to connect those issues and conditions in their lives. They work to share what they have learned with outside audiences.
- Build connections to home — work to build plans for how the new information and learning will impact future plans in their community and they work to take what happened and upon returning “home”, share their information with wider audiences in the community.

Educational goals
The elements of this process have been designed to teach tolerance, openness and understanding in a global society during a series of lessons, a workshop, or expedition all of which seek to raise awareness of the reality of diversity and layered history in each event, location and phenomenon.

The educational focus pushes students to discover cultural difference and perspective as a resource for future development in an interconnected world. During each aspect of the project critical activities are focused on:
- Discovering the local community/phenomenon and its particular context and history.
- Studying and raising awareness about the range of cultural groups, beliefs and practices by gathering, analysing and comparing perceptions of issues and phenomenon from cultural groups and nations around the world and in multi-ethnic societies.
- Raising awareness of globalisation and issues within our interconnected world, including integration problems connected to the understanding of intercultural values.
- Increasing the visibility of human rights, human dignity and those values focused on international cooperation, respect of minorities, and equal rights regardless of ethnicity, religion, national identity.
- Building human capital, that is designed to influence (increase) the quality of interactions between cultures, religions, and individuals.
- Increasing understanding of the stereotypes and biases present in each person’s life and the impact these have on daily interactions with others.

Why working to make education more authentic matters
Connecting education to the world involves building strong curricular connections between the classroom and global issues in all their local permutations. It is a key condition of authentic education. By building a support structure around participants as they move through the steps of a typical expedition, the teachers or group leaders involved in Expedition Inside Culture strengthen participants ability to become involved in deliberation. The participants— during the workshop— working in different groups (across ethnic, socioeconomic and cultural lines) on various tasks, have many occasions to face difficulties caused by diverse backgrounds, contexts or differences.

To plan expeditions, whether virtual, classrooms-based or out into the world outside of school buildings, significant time and effort need to be put into each of these elements. Participants need to know each other. They need time to share personal stories and the national, cultural or social context in which each occurs. They begin to understand the contexts by sharing, talking, and interpreting what they are hearing.

There need to be ways that each individual participant can define their personal needs and goals. Doing alone, however, leaves all ways of being together as a group are also needed. Whether individual or national issues becomes one of the most critical aspects for the ultimate success of each project. Every nation’s history is composed of the personal histories of its members. Working to identify cultural differences, identify points of conflict, and explore possible benefits of these differences, provides many opportunities for progress” (Schneider & Barsoux, 1997). Every concept or phenomenon is layered with perspectives, data, beliefs, and hypotheses. During an expeditionary workshop, we try to draw a picture of a nation’s history, a context for a concept, or development of a phenomenon by starting with the individual experience of participants, raising questions, and seeking new information and data. Finally, we begin to apply this information to our understanding. This helps us all become more aware that it is our humanness that matters. That despite everything, we can, as Maxine Greene has said, “...speak to others as eloquently and passionately as we can about justice and caring, love and trust” (1995).

Conclusion
The fragile nature of democracy is seen in many events and aspects of every day life today. Students encounter voters indifferent to the role the their vote plays in determining the direction for leaders. Students hear radio and television discourse that works to silent dissent, limit debate, shout over rational arguments, and exclude those who disagree. The discrepancy between how leaders try to convince others and how they publicly defend their positions.

Maxine Greene has said, “...speak to others as eloquently and passionately as we can about justice and caring, love and trust” (1995). This helps us all become more aware that it is our humanness that matters. That despite everything, we can, as Maxine Greene has said, “...speak to others as eloquently and passionately as we can about justice and caring, love and trust” (1995).

Scenario—Kamianets Podilskyi, Ukraine
A group of 18 high school and university students from Poland, Romania, and Ukraine have come to this area in Southwestern Ukraine. The focus of their workshop is on using the city as an educational space to teach tolerance. Over the course of the cloudy summer days of the workshop, the students engage in activities that focus on communication, field work, and problem-solving. It is an opportunity for them to practice skills they gained and also put themselves in the role of leader. One task asked them to “build an elephant”; in other words, as a group, form their bodies into a single, creature and role-play the actions of an “elephant”. Creativity, consensus, and shared leadership serve as a reminder of the skills necessary to solve broader issues across the national borders of their region.
interactions around the world lead to the growing importance of the development of the skills of delibration, cross-cultural communication, and problem solving connected to local and global issues connected to solidarity and social fairness.

Expedition Inside Culture works to build and share elements and practices across language, cultural and ethnic boundaries. Those involved are forced to pay careful attention to the values and ideologies inherent in their work. As Steiner-Khamsi (2004) has said, there is a clear difference between internationalisation (the evolutionary process) increasing intensification of global (economic, scientific, technological, and communicative) relations of interaction and exchange, and internationality (the semantic construction) — the act of constructing world views and reference horizons out of particular social, cultural, or national settings and domains.

We seek to work with the evolutionary process, to be proactive about our role in the world. We seek to be an agent in the growing global interactions and exchange.

In an era of growing awareness about the importance of preparing students for the knowledge society, as well as the ever-present existence of globalisation, societies may be questioning their particular definition of the ideal person (Tatto, 2007). Global efforts at educational reform seem to be aiming at the creation, not only of a new concept of the ideal person, but also of a new concept of the ideal teacher for the ideal person. It is rather impossible to find the universal solution for education, the ideal model to implement, but there are rules that might be accepted globally, though realised in practice differently. Those rules are connected to the broad concepts of freedom, active participation, democracy, development, understanding, connection, and support for those who need it.

Schools can be created that focus on real problems in their community, that engage students in participation in real life. Authentic education, as seen in expeditionary and place-based instructional frameworks, helps answer key questions for schools. How might students and teachers work to meet their own self-interest? And, how might they improve the democratic life of their communities?

As examples of programs around the world bring us evidence of what is possible and what we must pay attention to. Martin Luther King told us that, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied as a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” (King, 1964). By understanding the important role that schools, teachers and ultimately learning, play, educators can begin to think about the promise and possibility inherent in authentic educational practices. The elements we have designed in Expedition Inside Culture, are one small step.

Scenario- Lesnica, Slovakia

On a warm August day the Expedition Inside Culture workshop concluded in the Sít region of Northern Slovakia, in the village of Lesnica, near the small town of Stará Lhota. The area has a large population of Roma (gypsies), and they were one of the main ethnic groups discussed during the workshop. The workshop itself progressed through a series of events that were primarily student led. Multiple views of history were shared by students throughout the workshop as they explored their personal and national histories. The students presented these through storytelling, skits, and time lines. As they compared and contrasted the events of history, they found that each personal history was interwoven with others’ individual, family, and national histories.

An introduction to the local area’s history was shared. However, the participants had found that the materials they had read and researched prior to arriving at the workshop did not coincide with the history and demographics of the place they found upon arrival.

The workshop attendees ventured into the local area of Lesnica to interview people and to collect information about local history. The participants were split into multinational groups of four or five participants to conduct interviews. The interviews prompted discussions on townfolk’s perceptions of the Roma population and their opinion on Slovakia’s admittance to the European Union. The students then proceeded into the surrounding area to visit the region. After visits to Stará Lhobaunand Lipovec to conduct further research, they brought back their information and shared data with the broader workshop group. They worked to begin to make sense of their findings in coordination with some of the sources they had explored. Questions were posed to the students about the Roma populations’ minimal representation in history and their findings. After the students reflected on what they were concluding, each multinational group created a project or artifact to share with the workshop. After sharing their products, the group began to debate how these issues connected to things at home. Their work was only beginning.

References


Developing critical thinking through the discussion of controversial issues: Case studies from Indonesia and Australia

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Abstract
This paper explores teachers’ perceptions about developing critical thinking in students through discussing controversial issues. This project sought to explore the understandings and processes used by four teachers in Australia and Indonesia on their use of controversial discussions in everyday teaching. Data were collected using guided interviews and analysed by a thematic analysis. Analysis was validated by feedback from the subjects. The research found that the use of controversial issues as an essential element of the curriculum was thought inappropriate for classroom discussion because of their divisive nature, nowadays they are regarded in many educational contexts. The creation of a classroom climate where acceptance of diverse opinion and of the value of discursive and objective analysis in discussion was highly valued was seen as fundamental to establishing classrooms that would enhance the democratic ideal.

Keywords: teacher perceptions, critical thinking, controversial issues, citizenship education Indonesia, citizenship education Australia

Introduction
The teaching of critical thinking in schools has nation building as well as personal development dimensions. It benefits individuals, families, communities and states in many ways including economic, social, cultural and governmental. Whereas in the past, controversial issues were thought inappropriate for classroom discussion because of their divisive nature, nowadays they are regarded in many educational contexts as the perfect fodder for the development of thinking in students, and schools are seen as ideal venues to touch each person in society with the skills and processes of refined, logical and analytical thinking. Schools have community and personal development functions – creating the environment and fitting people with the skills for the development of responsible citizenship.

Elsewhere we argue Hanurawan & Waterworth, 2004) that critical thinking is a key skill, which includes the raising of controversial issues, for the development of thinking and valuing processes. We defined critical thinking as the capacity of individuals to acquire and assess information, to objectively analyses information and arguments, to use reason with clarity and precision, to make justifiable judgments and reach considered conclusions, while at the same time being able to monitor their own thinking processes (Hanurawan & Waterworth, 2004, p. 5).

We would argue that there are at least four views of the nature of controversial issues as they apply to classroom discussions:
• issues upon which people disagree on the basis of different ideological positions or world views (Robert Stouding, in Harwood and Hahn, 1990);
• issues which could generate reflective dialog in the classroom and result in the construction of democratic forms of discussion between learners (Harwood & Hahn, 1990);
• issues that raise passions or emotions and require the discipline of rationality to discuss (Flinders University 2001);
• issues that require the exercise of critical thinking strategies (Flinders University, 2001).

We regard critical thinking as an essential element of the curriculum as a means of refining thinking skills and fitting students with strategies to help them in productive ways in the future. Critical thinking skills need to be learned, practised and applied in ways such as in controversial discussions in the classroom.

This paper reports on a research project with four teachers in Indonesia and Australia that was conducted in an attempt to compare and contrast the basic philosophy and practical approaches taken by teachers in two very different cultural settings. Our focus was on the perceptions of critical thinking strategies used by each teacher rather than the content or value positions developed in controversial issues discussions.

We recognised the fact that the value positions of teachers would be very different and that the environment of open discussion of politically, religiously and ideologically focused issues would vary from place to place. However, this did not deter us from our objective to examine and analyses the teaching implications of the similarities and differences we were to discover.

Cultural contexts
The Indonesian education system operates according to national policy within a national curriculum and a centralised national examination system. Local control through provincial education authorities ensures that national priorities are met but that local needs and local curricula are also adequately represented. The curriculum, as published, encourages approaches to teaching and learning on active learning, student participation and the use of discussion and critical thinking in classrooms (Waterworth, 1996). Whether the system is able to accommodate these approaches is, however, compromised by other constitutional and statutory requirements and practical considerations (Waterworth & Supriyant, 1997).

The Indonesian national and constitutional commitment to a unified political and social philosophy is codified in the Pancasila (state ideology) which highlights and promotes harmonious fair relationships in society (Notonegoro, 1987; Saifullah, 1981). But, in practice, the philosophy may serve to neutralise the discussion of controversial issues within society (and therefore in the school) and institutionalise non-confrontational ways of handling them (Hanurawan & Waterworth, 1999). The centralised national examination system operates at every level of primary and secondary education, and applies to the subjects most normally associated with the teaching of critical thinking, namely, Social Studies and Pancasila and Citizenship Education. The examination system focuses mainly upon the memorisation of facts or the performance of foundational skills and is criterion rather than norm referenced.

However, the state doctrine and the examination system on their own may not be sufficient reason to explain the lack of teaching of critical thinking skills or of vigorous discussion of controversial issues in schools. There are also a number of practical and cultural factors that might be considered impediments to the teaching of critical thinking in the classroom (Waterworth, 1996). Firstly, there is a heavily prescribed competency based curriculum that excludes skills of critical thinking and encourages knowledge rather than attitudes and skills. The curriculum is closely tied to the examination system and tends to bind teachers’ choices of topics from day to day and limit their approaches to lessons. Teachers are fearful of omitting essential subject matter or of misrepresenting it, so they base their teaching on state prescribed textbooks. There are texts at every grade level and in every subject area. The sense of conformity in Indonesian society can be a cultural constraint for Indonesian teachers in attempting to develop critical thinking in their students. Students tend to hesitate in developing critical thinking because they feel they should conform to “so-called” majority opinions (Hanurawan, 2005).

Teaching, therefore, tends to be teacher and subject dominated. Teachers are regarded highly in the community as the source of wisdom and knowledge and as the guardians of academic quality. This encourages teachers to consider themselves as the dispensers of knowledge rather than the facilitators of learning or as arbiters in discussions of a controversial nature. Such an opinion is reinforced by educational leaders at regional and school level who monitor the ability of teachers to stick closely to the national curriculum and reward teachers for compliance with educational standards.

A report on the capability of the education system to respond to change stated that “in the Indonesian classroom, the teacher never left open any opportunity for students to argue” (Advocacy Work, 2001, p. 58). If anyone tried to ask questions or argue, the teacher would consider him or her to be a disobedient student who didn’t pay attention to the lesson – and the rest of the classmate would consider the student to be stupid. The culture definitely obstructed students from thinking critically. As in other paternalistic cultures, older people, religious people and traditional leaders were trusted to decide for the “goodness of their people”, and it was very difficult to argue with them (ibid.).

However, there is always an element of choice in teachers’ approaches to their teaching. Many teachers include segments in lessons which allow for the development of critical thinking skills or encourage the discussion of controversial issues which they consider would assist students to grasp better what they are learning. These teachers exhibit confidence in their own abilities to understand the curriculum and to
interpret it and a self-belief that they can cope with the classroom dynamics that will arise as a result of these approaches (Waterworth & Winiaatmadja, 1996). But many teachers lack the confidence and lack the training that would enable them to explore alternative curricular approaches. They consider themselves to be under a very real pressure to conform to the curriculum requirements and to fit every lesson into an already demanding schedule. With a crowded curriculum, teachers may often feel that the basic foundations must be covered first and that any “extras” – such as critical thinking – if covered at all, be left till later.

In the last two decades, Australian teachers have increasingly recognised the desirability and necessity of enabling their students to develop critical thinking skills. Prior to that, no deliberate teaching about thinking processes had been undertaken in a very serious way. In the realm of values teaching, Australia’s education system has had a chequered history. Within the state systems of education, teachers were at one stage required to refrain from giving or allowing to be given any comment of a political, religious or sexual nature. That situation has changed now. Teachers are encouraged to introduce controversial issues into classroom discussions but are expected also to find a balanced way of presenting opinions or allowing discussion. Teachers should maintain a balance in discussion, to refrain from giving their own opinions in highly sensitive matters and take into consideration the age and level of intellectual maturity of their students. Schools in some states now have specialist teachers in religious education and sex education, relieving normal classroom teachers of responsibilities for teaching in the more sensitive areas of community values. Private and independent schools (which also happen to receive supplementary government funding) are able to teach from a predetermined and clearly defined values position.

In the last ten years (and particularly in the last five), there has been a rapid escalation in the teaching of critical thinking skills and a greater willingness to tackle more controversial topics because of, one suspects, a slow transformation in the Australian community and a more open acceptance of a variety of points of view. The major stimulus for change has come from the realisation that Australian students need to be better fitted to analyses issues, weigh evidence and come to defensible conclusions in order to survive in a complex multicultural society. In addition, government education policy has shifted and there now seems to be a greater need to develop citizenship education in order to develop Australian society by enhancing public debate, reducing intercultural conflict and providing a more aware and responsible citizenry. Many schools have introduced special programs to enhance the development of critical thinking skills (as generic skills across all subject areas of the curriculum) particularly through professional development programs for teachers in the Bonif, Bloom, Gardiner, metacognition, problem based learning, the thinking curriculum, dimensions of learning, programs, and the like.

Method
The primary purpose of this research was to explore teachers’ perceptions about developing critical thinking in students through discussing controversial issues. We adopted an interpretive or qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) using comparative case studies (Hanurawan & Diponegoro, 2005). We chose two teachers from Indonesia and two teachers from Australia. Data were collected using guided interviews. Through guided interview techniques, the researchers can obtain all information required about developing critical thinking in students through discussing controversial issues from teachers’ subjective view, while at the same time allowing the important freedom of response and rich description to illustrate the concepts as necessary. The guided interview was audio-recorded and the responses were transcribed and analysed after the end of interview (Field & Morse, 1993). The collected data were analysed using a thematic analysis technique focusing on identifiable themes and patterns of behavior. As the results of the research were assembled, a conclusion was validated by the feedback from the subjects (Connole, Smith & Wiseman, 1993). In this context, subjects were asked to check transcribed interviews and the conclusions of the research. The interview was developed in Indonesian language and translated into Indonesian for the Indonesian fieldwork. The interviews were conducted in only the first language of teachers and the research assistant translated the Indonesian data into English. The analysis of data was conducted both in Indonesian and English.

Result
The Teachers
The four teachers were selected from Indonesian and Australian schools on the basis of their experience in dealing with controversial issues in the classroom and their understanding of curriculum requirements in critical thinking in their various countries.
major concern is not “letting my own opinion influence the students”, something the Indonesian teachers are intent on. There was a number of teachers who pointed to curriculum requirements being aligned with the objective of fostering professional development activities on the development of thinking skills. Jenny does not see the connection between these activities and the intentions of the curriculum for Victorian schools.

**Purposes and scope of controversial issues discussions**

The case study teachers identified a number of purposes behind controversial issues discussions in classrooms. Two of them directly mentioned the ultimate aim of developing students who had the capacity to contribute as useful citizens to the community in their future adult lives.

Jenny White (Australia): I try to build up the decision making skills of my students so that they will be able to use them later in life.

Ibu Wati (Indonesia): Teachers should appreciate the diversity of opinions coming from citizens in the class. I encourage students to give differing opinions – every opinion should be able to be expressed in a democratic world which is what we have now. The different students’ points of view are united in one conclusion by discussion with other children and with me. If children’s opinions are not based on facts or data, teachers should give an explanation democratically. In this context, the teacher must be careful in giving an explanation, because it can make students afraid to express their opinions in a later discussion.

Jenny White referred to the needs in the future and Ibu Wati talked of the students as citizens. Jenny was focusing on the individual life skills in decision making that would contribute to an individual child’s life, while Wati was interested in the way free expression of opinion would contribute to the community functioning better in the future. Ibu Wati injected a cautionary note into her comments about the interventionist role of the teacher in sensitively “correcting” the formation of opinion in students – a matter referred to later in this analysis. Ibu Wati’s reference to students and teachers arriving at one agreed conclusion suggests that she may not fully understand the nature of controversial issues discussions which are chosen simply because they trigger a variety of diverse responses from students.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): The students have a chance to describe controversial problems in society through study of language and I find this is very useful for the teacher and the students.

Ibu Ani took up the same theme by showing that controversial issues discussion could be an aid to other kinds of learning. Saul saw discussions of this type as a way of bringing enlightenment to the minds of students by providing previously ignored insights.

Saul Brown (Australia): If a student says “Oh, I’ve never thought of that” or “I now see what the (newspaper) is saying” or “I don’t agree with this” I feel I have achieved something.

Ibu Ani also saw the use of controversial discussions as a means of assisting students in their psychological development or as a way of helping them overcome developmental problems in their lives. Interestingly, Jenny also saw controversial discussions as a way of reducing prejudice in students and ultimately in assisting the community in developing greater tolerance for human difference. She identified religious, ethnic and disability issues as those able to be tackled in schools through discussion.

Jenny White (Australia): I think children are less prejudiced now than they were in the past. We have Muslim students at our school – they are well respected. We’ve had disabled students in the school for the last 20 years and this has helped. We try to bring people from the community to our school. We’ve had Aboriginal and disabled speakers.

Ibu Wati (Indonesia): The school tries to promote harmony or unity of opinion. Where students are critical, teachers should guide their thinking towards constructive ways of thinking… The Department of Education’s curriculum is a blueprint for teaching. The teacher’s role is to apply it in the classroom.

In a similar vein, Ibu Wati considered the school as a venue for promoting social harmony in the community. She took this thought a step further than might have been reasonable in Australia, by saying that unity of opinion is a desirable outcome of a controversial issues discussion as much as any other type of instruction and that critical thought should have strong constructive elements. Further, she linked this educational goal to the intentions and requirements of the Department of Education.

The purposes and scope of controversial issues discussions were expressed in general by both Indonesian and Australian case study teachers as: creating thoughtful participating citizens of the future; providing life skills in logical thinking and decision making; creating a community of thought where diversity of opinion might be better accepted – the essential environment for a truly democratic society; providing better insights or tools for learning; enabling students to openly discuss issues confronting young people and thus aid them in the processes of psychological, emotional and social maturation; assisting in prejudice reduction in students and in the wider community and creating social harmony in the school and the community in general.

The Indonesian and Australian case study teachers appeared to differ on a number of issues. The Australian teachers saw controversial issues discussions as an integral part of the learning process – as a way of developing skills in thinking and as an appropriate means of improving learning. The Indonesian teachers tended to see controversial issues discussions as a perhaps less controllable way of contributing to learning even though the ultimate outcomes of the approach were equally supported by both groups. The Indonesian teachers were concerned about controlling the outcomes of a discussion as a means of gaining particular content objectives in the curriculum. Their focus was on the knowledge outcomes of the curriculum whereas the Australian teachers were more interested in the process outcomes. The Indonesian teachers appeared to be more confined by the curriculum and the Department of Education and controversial discussions were regarded as a useful but less productive addition to the normal approaches teachers use.

**Strategies and techniques**

All the teachers in the case study found this was useful for the teacher and the students. They used a similar range of teaching strategies and techniques in introducing controversial issues into students’ work. The main technique was whole-class discussion although this was supported by a number of other strategies including writing tasks, small group discussion, individual assignment work and student oral presentations to the whole class or a combination of these activities. There were, however, different mixes of strategies between the teachers and these highlighted the distinctiveness of each teacher’s approach.

The teachers used a number of strategies to develop a safe discussion environment and to encourage the free expression of opinion. We particularly focused on how the teachers encouraged shy and passive students to participate and to spread participation more evenly through the class.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): I involve shy and passive students through providing motivating writing tasks which students have to complete individually. I also give students a chance to ask critical questions in class or to give their opinions individually.

Saul Brown (Australia): I try to get the confidence of the students by building a strong personal relationship with each student. They are happier to express their opinions when they feel they are in a secure discussion environment. If students are shy, I use those who are willing to contribute first and also direct (simpler) questions to the shy kids.

Teachers seemed to use the more forthright or confident students in a positive way as a means of establishing a discussion or drawing out particular points of view. Student confidence in the teacher was seen as a key strategy by Saul who thought this contributed to student willingness to join a discussion. Writing tasks and group tasks were seen as valuable in building confidence and establishing something worth saying. Simple questions were also used as a means to start discussions and establish the basic parameters of topics.

The Australian teachers appeared to have a broader range of strategies available to them in injecting greater interest into discussions or in using variety to maintain student attention and focus.

Saul Brown (Australia): I play a devil’s advocate role to help students construct a more powerful response to an issue. I try to get students to develop a “for” and “against” list on each significant issue. I also use debating to help students develop an argument with sometimes formal debates and sometimes informal such as through brainstorming. The school has a strong student debating club.

I use the tools of the Thinking Curriculum such as De Bono’s thinking hats.
Jenny White (Australia): I use “think-pair-share” with a larger group of children. Children’s confidence in sharing ideas with the whole class takes time to build – they can do it more easily in a small group first. Eventually we develop all the children to a level where they can join in a whole class discussion… We use a number of teaching techniques including activity based studies, role plays, cooperative learning, the “human graph” (where children place themselves on a graph representing their opinion and then have to explain why they chose that position), moral dilemmas, where children have to decide what they would do in a challenging situation. For example, if you were at a party and the person to drive you home was drunk, what would you do? It seemed that professional development activities gave teachers greater scope to choose activities that would develop student thinking. Thinking skills emerged as a high priority in the Australian teaching policies and curriculum and helped generate more scope for activities. Cooperative groups involving heterogeneous and random group membership were strongly used by the Australian teachers as a means of promoting an appreciation of the diversity of student frames of reference and for encouraging inter group discourse. Saul Brown (Australia): I form groups cooperatively and randomly. The confidence of students grows as the year progresses. I also try to link student presentations to assessment. The opportunity to build critical thinking skills into assessment at senior school level also lent great weight to the use of controversial issues in the classroom. The basic classroom strategies such as whole class discussions, small group and cooperative group work, writing tasks and oral presentations were used by all teachers. The Indonesian teachers depended mostly on whole class discussions while the Australian teachers used these approaches and added other strategies focusing on critical thinking skills.

The role of the teachers

The teachers had a number of opinions about their role in introducing, managing and concluding controversial issues discussions. Ibu Wati talked about the teacher having the responsibility to reveal “the truth” in controversial issues discussions (see quote below) and to control “stubborn” or “disagreeing” students. This gave the impression that she introduces issues which are either non-controversial or about which the teacher is obliged to provide the final opinion. Ibu Ani provided a similar view.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): I find it difficult to know how to convince children about the truth. Although students can study their topics through discussion based on careful consideration of the facts from books, the process should be controlled and directed by me so that it can run smoothly. I need to monitor discussion so that I can improve the efficiency of the discussion and keep to the curriculum. I give a direction and conclusion to the discussion. I think the teacher has the responsibility to provide the conclusion.

On the other hand, the Australian teachers said they attempted to do the opposite – to refrain from influencing student opinion.

Jenny White (Australia): (One problem I struggle with is not) letting my own opinion influence the students. I don’t put my own point of view strongly. Saul Brown (Australia): I try to let the discussion flow first. I try to cultivate a classroom atmosphere where students will give respect to people giving an opposite opinion to their own. I control the discussion and will not allow a confident or passionate student to dominate a discussion. I also plan the discussion using the Thinking Curriculum tools (such as an issues sheet). I’m the teacher, not the lecturer. I’m not there to dictate.

The four case study teachers suggested that they needed to manage discussions and not allow them to get out of control. Two teachers wanted to exercise this control as a part of discipline strategies but Saul wanted to shape discussions to maximise student thinking skills. Saul’s control was not associated with shaping the student views but Wati and Ani’s were.

Problems in introducing controversial issues

Certain issues were troubling to teachers in introducing controversial discussions. Amongst these was a concern for the capacity of students to develop open mindedness. An unwillingness to openly debate issues may come, therefore, from prejudices generated from home or other places or from lack of interest or motivation to become informed about current community issues. These two factors could, of course, be interrelated. Saul suggested that personal experiences could also prevent or stifle open discussion and that teachers needed to be sensitive to the psychological burdens some students might be bearing. The emotional hang ups of a few students or even one student could affect the capacity of the whole class to dispassionately consider certain controversial issues. Jenny confirmed this view:

Jenny White (Australia): Another issue is dealing with a topic about which some students might be sensitive. If we talk about controversial issues in class when students parents smoke, it can be hurtful to them. They need to talk about dying from smoking… Younger children sometimes want to talk about private family issues such as an alcoholic father. That can become difficult. Both the Indonesian teachers raised concerns about the constraints of the crowded curriculum, implying that controversial issues discussions were more likely to be sacrificed when there was not time to cover the essential curriculum. This opinion gave further strength to the belief that Indonesian teachers considered controversial issues discussions as an optional extra rather than as an integral part of any teaching.

Ibu Ani (Indonesia): While the school is in favour of developing students’ capabilities to think, the constraints of the examination system (national examinations are sat by all students) reduce the time available for the study of controversial issues. Our school is attempting to increase the percentage of students who pass – which is only 80-90% at the moment so this is the focus of our attention. The national examinations demand the right answers which students must memorise and this eliminates the need for the expression of opinions. The examination system, at all levels of Indonesian education, seemed to dominate the setting of priorities in schooling and to have an oppressive effect on the development of independent thinking in students.

Teacher support and guidelines in dealing with controversial issues

The Australian teachers both held a very cynical opinion about the quality of their initial teacher training in preparing them to manage controversial issues discussions. On the other hand, they were commendatory in their opinion of professional development training to give them an understanding of how to develop critical thinking in students.

Saul Brown (Australia): It was really an inadequate teacher training. Even now I find that student teachers are very reluctant to lead discussions. They avoid them, often, I think, because they feel they cannot control the students in discussion sessions. Ibu Ani (Indonesia): My training was good enough. It contributed well to my ability to handle controversial topics. A general understanding of methods of teaching and learning was also helpful.

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Discussion

The teachers were chosen for the case studies because they were committed to the belief that children’s education is promoted through the study of critical thinking and they all attempted to encourage the practice of critical thinking skills through the discussion of controversial issues in the classroom. Analysis of the case studies revealed a high level of similarity between the teachers even though they worked in vastly different cultural and educational contexts. They all shared the view that one of the major purposes of training students in critical thinking was to prepare students for citizenship within a society where diversity of opinion was readily accepted. The teachers in this research were generally of the view that the promotion of critical thinking was most successfully achieved in the classroom by means of cooperative learning, equal participation of all students, and group work. They saw the development of critical thinking skills as an important aspect of training students for citizenship. The teachers in this research were generally of the view that the promotion of critical thinking was most successfully achieved in the classroom by means of cooperative learning, equal participation of all students, and group work. They saw the development of critical thinking skills as an important aspect of training students for citizenship.
from both countries chose similar types of topics – those that promoted diversity of opinion and all used a range of teaching strategies in their classrooms. They all sensed the tension between needing to manage classroom discussion (to keep discussions on track) and allow the free ranging expression of opinion within the safety and acceptance of the classroom. They faced similar issues in dealing with difficult topics and allowing for the diverse sensitivities of the students.

There were however some differences between the selected Indonesian and Australian teachers on developing critical thinking in students through controversial issues discussions. However, one of the chief advantages of teaching critical thinking is that it puts into the hands of students the capacity to critically examine their own thinking and to search for objective and justifiable ways of thinking. It therefore has transformative potential in seeking for better solutions to community problems and promoting understanding of the social, ideological and political structures that divide the world. We would argue that the teaching of critical thinking should be promoted and developed in both countries.

Critical thinking is a central building block in a democratic classroom and is essential to developing a spirit of inquiry and curiosity in students. Critical thinking skills must be taught and refined in all stages of schooling and they can be readily practised in controversial issues discussions. The findings of this research project suggest that teachers in both countries need not only the skills to develop critical thinking in students but also an openness to allowing constructive, free flowing debate in the classroom. We consider that these are fundamental issues in creating a future society of responsible and active citizens.

References


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Accommodating environmental controversies in the classroom curriculum: Too hot to handle or opportunities for deep learning?

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Abstract

Studies have shown that young people have a keen interest in environmental issues and the controversies surrounding them, yet environmental controversies often struggle to gain unfettered access to the classroom curriculum. This article discusses the findings of a research project that investigated the beliefs of secondary school teachers about a proposal to build a pulp mill in Tasmania. The study found that teachers were wary of the political context but nonetheless discerned the educational benefits of including subject matter of topical and particular interest to their students in the classroom curriculum. Although environmental controversies can be hot to handle, this paper argues that a student-centred approach to curriculum design, organised around issues of relevance and meaning to young people, offers scope for substantive engagement and deep learning.

Introduction

The environmental movement had its origins in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, published on the cusp of the Sixties social revolution in 1962, which eloquently argued the urgent need to address degradation of the natural environment. In the intervening decades, the study of environmental issues has been widely accepted as legitimate and worthwhile subject matter (Gough, 2002). Yet, in Australian schools and elsewhere, it has rested uneasily in the curricular space contested by the empiricism of the sciences on the one hand and the politicised context of social education on the other. By their nature, environmental controversies are often characterised by political polemics, yet in many cases they are highly complex and therefore provide ample opportunity for students to develop nuanced understandings beyond that of crude debate. As such, local environmental controversies that are genuinely relevant to young people provide rich opportunities for powerful learning.

This article draws its data from a small-scale Bachelor of Education (Honours) research project (McLaine, 2007) that investigated Northern Tasmanian teachers’ beliefs about teaching controversial issues in the period following the 2003 announcement of a proposal to build a large-scale pulp mill near Bell Bay in the Tamar Valley region of Tasmania. The proposed pulp mill would enjoy a competitive advantage due to its site in terms of the adjacent seaport and close proximity to timber plantations, and modelling suggests it could significantly benefit the Tasmanian economy (West, 2009). Conversely, it is well documented that pulp mills are notorious sources of environmental toxins (e.g. Colodey & Wells, 1992) and, while wastewater from pulp mills can be effectively treated (Pokhrel & Viraughavan, 2004), the proposed pulp mill would still need to be monitored in a transparent and trustworthy fashion.

The key parties involved in this environmental controversy were, on the one hand, a coalition of government and business interests wanting to rejuvenate the ailing Tasmanian forestry industry which has lost two-thirds of its workforce, and on the other, a well-organised environmental lobby in Tasmania, with a history including the successful Franklin River blockade in 1982 that resulted in the cancellation of a major hydro dam project (Roe, 1997; West, 2009). Prior to and during the period of data collection, feelings in the region ran high. Protagonists were prone to exaggeration and quick to depict their opponents as unpatriotic. For example, a spokesman at a “river rally” protest against the pulp mill involving scores of marine craft sailing down the Tamar River, stated that “(the pulp mill) is the most hideous act of Western democracy (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 23-24).” Accordingly, the social context of the research project was clearly charged with a degree of fear and distrust.

The project investigated teachers’ perceptions about the following three issues: (1) the extent to which environmental controversies are taught in schools; (2) teachers’ beliefs about teaching environmental controversies; and (3) the feasibility of teaching environmental controversies in traditional subject areas such as the sciences.

This article reports on the findings of the project. In the process, it examines the case for teaching environmental controversies, both in the context of the science classroom and the social education classroom. It then links the study of environmental controversies with the interdisciplinary concepts of sustainability and globalisation which are now embedded in the Australian Curriculum (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). The article also discusses integrated curriculum approaches relevant to teaching environmental controversies. It concludes that it is important for schools in democratic countries to help young people to develop sophisticated perspectives on environmental controversies, but that traditional approaches dominated by stereotypes in teaching methods within discrete subject areas may be ill-suited to accomplish this.

Literature review

The case in favour of accommodating controversial issues within the classroom curriculum is relatively strong and is best made using a wide-angle lens: firstly considering disciplinary perspectives in science and social education, then secondly examining the concepts of sustainability and globalisation which cut across the traditional subject areas in the school curriculum.

Concerns about student engagement in science

In their national review of science in Australian schools in 2000, Goodrum, Hackling and Rennie found that students find science “engaging and challenging” when it connects with their interests and life experiences but, too often, “this is not the case” (2001, p. 166). At the grassroots level, some teachers in Australia are eschewing textbooks and making concerted efforts to actively engage students by drawing subject matter for science lessons from local contexts, both in Tasmania (e.g. Kenny, Seen & Purser, 2008), and elsewhere in Australia (e.g. Tyler, Symington, Kirkwood & Malcolm, 2008). In another national review of science education, Tyler (2007) called for a “re-imagining” of the Australian science curriculum with “varied and open pedagogies” knowledge to actively engage young people with learning (p. 67). He added that subject matter should be chosen “with a view to its usefulness in students’ current and future lives as citizens” (p. 64). In the same vein, Roth and Calabrese Barton (2004) suggested that it is time to “rethink” scientific literacy so that young people learn how to apply their knowledge of science to meaningfully address personal and community issues. Controversial issues offer a promising way to connect scientific understanding with “real-life” applications that are relevant and meaningful to young people. In the context of citizenship education, for example, Oulton, Day, Dillon and Grace (2004) found that investigating controversial issues helped young people to become scientifically literate by teaching them how arguments are constructed and opinions are swayed.

Controversial issues in the social education classroom

Controversial issues are regarded as an “integral and inescapable” aspect of the curriculum in social education classrooms (Marsh & Hart, 2011, p. 174) but, student-centred investigation of local controversial issues is relatively uncommon in social education because many teachers lack confidence, have insufficient opportunity for professional learning, or are fearful of disapproval from their local community (Barton & McCully, 2007; Johnston, 2007; Kivunja, Reitano & Porter, 2011).

Gilbert (2011) nonetheless builds a compelling case for combining values education and controversial issues and bringing this into the social education classroom in order to prepare young people for active democratic citizenship as adults. He argues that investigating controversial issues teaches young people the skills of negotiation, persuasion and logical analysis; and fosters attitudes of tolerance, empathy and caring. Accordingly, Gilbert explains, controversies can be either discussed “in sophisticated, informed and critical ways; or in crude, ignorant and prejudiced ways” (2011, p. 96). This kind of critical approach to education, teaching the skills needed for active citizenship, is befitting of well-educated citizens in a Western democracy (Apple & Beane, 2007; Barton & McCully, 2007).
Another facet to the pedagogy of controversial issues is to develop a strategy for handling personal bias. A contemporary approach, such as utilised in Tasmania, is to flexibly adopt up to four positions according to circumstances: (1) neutral or impartial – where one’s position or bias is withheld, (2) stated commitment – where one’s position is revealed during the course of discussion, (3) balanced approach – where one offers different points of view, and (4) devil’s advocate – where one adopts an extreme position differing from the position held by the majority of the class (Gilbert, 2011, pp. 94-96; Marsh & Hart, 2011, pp. 173-175).

Globalisation and sustainability

On a global basis, education for sustainable development has gained considerable momentum over the last decade (Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). For instance, American middle school educators have found that throughout the USA, degradation of the natural environment consistently ranks very highly among the concerns of young people (Beane, 1997, 2005). Similarly, a survey involving over 2,000 children in South Australia found that caring for the environment was their equal top concern alongside fear of a family member or friend dying (Cornish, 2007).

Based on data collected from Tasmanian primary school principals, a case study of a suburban primary school in Hobart, as well as extensive analyses of media publications and public policy documents in Australia, Mulford and Edmunds (2010) concluded that four interrelated forces – (1) globalisation, (2) pressure on the environment, and (3) changes in demography and, (4) social education and science. Indeed, her “mutualism” metaphor, borrowed from biological science, can be seen as a strong indicator of the growth of environmental citizenship. Similarly, a survey involving over 2,000 children in Australia found that caring for the environment was their equal top concern alongside fear of a family member or friend dying (Cornish, 2007).

The Australian Curriculum recognises “Sustainability” as one of only three cross-curriculum priorities, along with “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures” and “Asia and Australia’s engagement with Asia”, which are embedded in the national curriculum’s learning areas (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2011). As the Australian Curriculum acknowledges, the notion of sustainability is a “big idea” with cross-curricular implications that transcend discrete subject areas such as social education or science. Gough’s (2002) key insight in this regard is that environmental issues such as sustainability need to be studied in an interdisciplinary context mutually drawing subject matter from both social education and science. Indeed, her “mutualism” metaphor, borrowed from biological science, can be logically extended to one of “obligate mutualism” – such as a coral organism and photosynthetic algae living within the coral which both need each other to survive – where both social education and science must have a presence for a given environmental issue to survive within the ecosystem of the curriculum.

Multidisciplinary and integrated curriculum approaches

Given that it has interdisciplinary roots, social education is often recommended as an ideal launching pad for curriculum integration (e.g., Marsh, 2010), yet few writers indicate what an integrated curriculum would look like or how it could be implemented in a crowded school curriculum. In many cases recommendations can be founded on subject-centred considerations: they identify overlaps between subject areas which are then organised around a common theme (e.g., McMullen & Fletcher, 2009). Perhaps the most promising approach to curriculum integration in terms of learning outcomes, albeit one that requires whole-hearted commitment, is the student-centred “integrative” model based on democratic principles where teachers and students collaboratively design and implement the classroom curriculum (Beane, 1997, 2005). The integrative approach is ideal for investigating environmental controversies emerging from students’ personal concerns. Similarly, Collins (2009) advocated the use of “guiding ethical questions” to direct student inquiry from social education into a range of other subject areas (p. 5). In this way, she suggested, “the relevant disciplinary knowledge would be thrown open for students to step through in a meaningful search for answers” (p. 5). As Beane (1995) explained, this allows students to access knowledge within the disciplines on the basis of serving their needs and purposes, rather than pursuing aird studies of disciplinary knowledge out of context.

Innovations such as an integrated approach to utility of teaching controversial topics have variously been employed, and are likely to be effective only as long as they are continued and not the domain or (the place) to discuss it, and that’s wrong. I can always relate it back to science; addressing it through critical scientific literacy.

Methodology

The study used a mixed method approach involving the collection of quantitative survey data and qualitative interview data then verifying the data by utilising the “validating qualitative data model” recommended by Creswell and Plano Clark (2007, p. 63). The participants were recruited from eight secondary schools in the Tamar Valley region of Tasmania. The sample sizes were 28 participants for the survey questionnaire and 5 participants for the interviews. The interviewees were selected if, during the survey, they made links between teaching environmental controversies and the possibility of utilising integrated curriculum designs.

The survey included a demographic section, a section rating participants’ degree of agreement with various statements, and a section with open-ended questions. The middle section of the survey consisted of several statements asking teachers to rank their extent of agreement on a five-point Likert scale (Creswell, 2005). In summarised form, some of these statements were: “Students should study local controversies such as the proposed pulp mill”, “I am comfortable teaching environmental issues such as the proposed pulp mill”, “when teaching controversial local environmental issues such as the proposed pulp mill teachers should conceal their opinions and biases”, “it is not safe to teach controversial issues such as the proposed pulp mill”, and “I would like opportunities for professional learning relating to teaching controversial issues”. The open-ended questions in the final section of the survey provided teachers with opportunities to comment on: (1) the extent to which they believed environmental controversies could be taught within traditional subjects such as the sciences, (2) whether or not they had taught students about the pulp mill issues and the subject context and pedagogies they used, and (3) what they considered to be most important about teaching controversial issues.

Although the sample size was too small to allow generalisation on a statistical basis, and the use of Likert scale data has known limitations (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000), the data were analysed for the presence of substantive trends which could support a case study amenable to “fuzzy generalisation” (Bassey, 1999, p. 51) and, accordingly, have relevance to other educational contexts that accommodate environmental controversies within the classroom curriculum.

The project was approved by a full committee of the Human Research Ethics Committee of Tasmania. The consent nature of the proposed pulp mill and its high profile in the Tasmanian media leading up to and during the period of data collection were assumed to have influenced the participants’ responses.

Results

The project findings demonstrated the presence of some pronounced trends within the participants’ views and beliefs and, taken together, these provide a case study that provides useful insights for other secondary school contexts.

Beliefs about teaching environmental controversies

Ninety three percent of the participants agreed that they had a personal interest in controversial issues that affects Tasmania. Ninety percent of the participants agreed that local environmental controversies such as the proposed pulp mill should be taught in schools. For instance, a male science teacher with over 20 years of teaching experience stated:

If you don’t [teach about local environmental controversies] then you are saying to students it is not the domain or (the place) to discuss it, and that’s wrong. I can always relate it back to science; addressing it through critical scientific literacy.

Seventy nine percent of the participants were comfortable with, and felt safe about teaching local environmental controversies such as the proposed pulp mill, but 21% were uncomfortable and felt unsafe;
with no middle ground on this issue. Notably, 25% of the participants had been specifically instructed by their school administration not to teach about the controversy, which amounts to a remarkable example of censorship of the curriculum within the Australian context. A similar sized group, 28% of the participants, perceived a climate of fear and conflict surrounding the pulp mill debate, meaning that it was safer not to discuss the controversy at all levels of schooling. Although small minorities believed it is preferable to limit teaching controversies to Grades 7-8 (4% or one person) or to Grades 9-10 (0%), in summary, the participants thought that local environmental controversies are best taught within the classroom curriculum, and it seems reasonable to assume that many teachers in other contexts would think the same. Indeed, we suggest that investigating environmental controversies and, in the years of schooling, Curriculum integration offers a promising vehicle for investigating environmental controversies because it allows a given issue to be considered holistically without ignoring important aspects, which is often necessarily the case during single-subject lessons. For example, a student-centred integrated curriculum design might investigate the environmental impacts of a controversial development such as the proposed Tamar Valley pulp mill. Utilising the key principles of sustainability, a student-led investigation could also include analyses of the social and economic impacts of the pulp mill, both positive and negative; and provide a balance to conclusions students might draw on the merits or otherwise of the project going ahead.

While subject-centred or "multidisciplinary" approaches to curriculum integration could be utilised to investigate environmental controversies, these are typically designed by teams of teachers; thus student-centred approaches, such as Beane’s integrative model (1997) which involves intensive teacher-student collaboration, are preferable for ethical reasons (Dowden, 2007). Indeed, in the case of investigating environmental controversies, there is an ethical and moral imperative to allow students to develop their own lines of inquiry; by constructing their own knowledge by drawing from the disciplines, then developing their own nuanced conclusions and personal stances.

The integrative model has another feature which especially lends itself to the investigation of environmental controversies. In collaboration with their teachers, young people frequently formulate micro- and macro-applications of the same theme (Beane, 1997). For instance, they might choose their own personal health and the problem of national obesity; or, taking the example already discussed, the local environmental controversy of a proposed pulp mill and instances of multinational companies exporting pollution by establishing poorly regulated industrial complexes in third-world countries.

Pedagogies might include using digital technology to connect with other classes investigating local environmental controversies in other parts of the world. For instance, a class in Louisiana, USA, might be gauging the impact of an oil spill on their local coastal ecology and the regional shrimp industry; or a class in Churchill, in the Canadian province of Manitoba, could be investigating the impact of polar bear eco-tourism on the local First Nations community and the Hudson Bay economy; or a class in the locality of Simandou, in the interior of the West African country of Guinea, might be investigating the impact of a new iron ore mine on the biodiversity of the Upper Guinean rainforest and as a major employer in the local economy. Young people become truly global citizens: by collaboratively sharing their findings then comparing respective ways of knowing, by gaining deeper insights into each other’s cultures, and by making meaningful personal connections. Rich exchanges between young people would result in a rapid and “deparochialised” kind of globalisation (Lingard, 2006, p. 289), rather than the imperialistic kind of globalisation often associated with brands of soft drink or fast food, and strongly promote the global development of what Apple (2001, p. 18) referred to as “thick” democratic understandings.

Curriculum integration

We suggest that environmental controversies can and should be taught across the curriculum throughout the years of schooling. Curriculum integration offers a promising vehicle for investigating environmental controversies because it allows a given issue to be considered holistically without ignoring important aspects, which is often necessarily the case during single-subject lessons. For example, a student-centred integrated curriculum design might investigate the environmental impacts of a controversial development such as the proposed Tamar Valley pulp mill. Utilising the key principles of sustainability, a student-led investigation could also include analyses of the social and economic impacts of the pulp mill, both positive and negative; and provide a balance to conclusions students might draw on the merits or otherwise of the project going ahead.

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Conclusion

The participants in the research study believed that it is generally desirable to accommodate environmental controversies in the classroom curriculum. However, in the case of the proposed Tamar Valley pulp mill, some were not convinced it would be safe and others were denied the right to do so. The participants believed that environmental controversies can be taught across the curriculum. We have argued that a student-centred design for curriculum integration opens the door to rich learning experiences. The study of environmental controversies prepares future generations who – as active and responsible citizens – are then better equipped to understand and apply disciplinary knowledge from the specialist subject areas that inform their careers. Thus, the primary purpose of accommodating environmental controversies in the classroom curriculum should not, as Apple (2000) explained, be merely to promote “functional literacy”, but to create a critical, powerful and political literacy.

Discussion

Teachers’ beliefs

All the participants in the study believed that environmental controversies should be accommodated within the classroom curriculum, and it seems reasonable to assume that many teachers in other contexts would think the same. Indeed, we suggest that investigating environmental controversies and, in the process, developing a sophisticated literacy relating to the art of negotiation, debate and compromise is a democratic right for all young people and, in the long run, is fundamental to nation building and ensuring that citizens are well educated and informed.

Some of the participants in the study felt uncomfortable or unsafe at the prospect of teaching an environmental controversy. This finding echoed other Tasmanian research during the period of the Tamar Valley pulp mill controversy that found that Bachelor of Education students were keen to avoid teaching controversies in the classroom curriculum. However, in the case of the proposed Tamar Valley pulp mill, some were not convinced it would be safe and others were denied the right to do so. The participants believed that environmental controversies can be taught across the curriculum. We have argued that a student-centred design for curriculum integration opens the door to rich learning experiences. The study of environmental controversies prepares future generations who – as active and responsible citizens – are then better equipped to understand and apply disciplinary knowledge from the specialist subject areas that inform their careers. Thus, the primary purpose of accommodating environmental controversies in the classroom curriculum should not, as Apple (2000) explained, be merely to promote “functional literacy”, but to create a critical, powerful and political literacy.
References


A Review of Teaching the Social Sciences and Humanities in an Australian Curriculum

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This new edition of this book is a welcome addition largely because of the number of significant changes that have been from previous editions and also because of the new chapters that have been added. The result is a book that comprehensively describes, discusses and analyses a number of highly significant issues, themes and problems that are relevant to the teaching of social sciences and humanities. In a book of this nature there are chapters that one would expect to see, in particular chapters on planning, resources, pedagogy, learning, including skill and concept development, and assessment. However, the strength of the book lies in the manner in which established ideas centre upon the teaching and learning of social studies and humanities have been updated to give the book a highly contemporary feel. New chapters include studies of the relevance of the social sciences and humanities to learning; a chapter on learning, skills and enquiry in social education; and an eye to the National Curriculum, a chapter on the teaching of history; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander studies and one on multi-cultural education, global and Asian studies, all welcome additions.

Beyond this are included chapters on economics education, civics and citizenship (in my view a vastly under-represented area of the curriculum that suffers from too much rhetoric and too little practice); a chapter on teaching geography and, to my delight, a chapter a Values, Controversial Issues and Interfaith Understanding. One of these topics within the Australian Curriculum is that which is often placed in the ‘too hard’ box. Using an accessible narrative the chapters are well structured and follow a logical progression in the development of ideas, the learning of readers is scaffolded as they are taken through the chapters. Each chapter contains useful summary boxes and tables of key ideas and ends with concluding comments, a list of questions and activities for investigation and an extensive reference list.

They are surely right when in the preface to the book the authors claim that “Global events, especially acts of terrorism that have occurred and continue to occur in many countries, reinforce the need for all persons to make thoughtful, reflective decisions in facing these personal, national and international problems. It is essential for teachers and students to examine the societal problems - to develop well informed logical arguments in grappling with present day acts of terrorism, violent retaliation, censorship, repression and ideological conflicts.” (p.xii) While I might wish they had taken this argument further in the pages of the book it certainly provides a comprehensive and well thought through introduction to these and other issues; many of the chapters provide good jumping off points for the more detailed analysis of the themes they raise.

Importantly, what is offered is far more than a ‘this is how you do it’, or, ‘this is all you need’ book of the type that is so popular these days. Although it rightfully offers a number of important practical insights and suggestions, just as importantly the book places its subject within a wider educational and social framework in ways that cause readers to investigate not only what we teach and how students learn but, critically, why we teach it and the political and ideological reasoning that lies behind the curriculum.

Based on an extensive knowledge and understanding of the field, this book is certainly bound to be of interest and of great value to teachers and student teachers wishing to explore in detail a range of issues connected to the individual study of subjects such as history, geography and economics and to those who are perhaps more committed to the teaching of social sciences and humanities within integrated frameworks.

Notes for Contributing Authors

The Social Educator provides a forum for innovative practices and research in relation to Social Education. The journal encourages submissions of manuscripts from educational researchers, teachers and teacher educators and invites contributions which address Social Education curriculum broadly and the teaching and learning of it in schools and tertiary education.

Feature Articles

The journal encourages authors to contribute manuscripts that analyse and contribute to the field of Social Education, including: original research, theoretical analyses, social commentary and practitioner exchange. The journal conducts a rigorous peer review process for all manuscripts submitted. To this end, The Social Educator continues to present outstanding work in the field of social education writ large that connects local studies with global impact and blurs the boundaries between national and international settings.

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Articles for consideration should be sent in electronic format (WORD.doc) to The Editor, Dr. Lisa J. Cary, SEAA, email: l.cary@murdoch.edu.au

Papers should address Social Education curriculum broadly and/or the teaching and learning of it in schools, tertiary education and/or community contexts.

Articles should be no more than 5000 words in length (inclusive of references and spaces taken by tables and/or figures which are calculated at 500 words per page).

Papers are to be typed in 12 point font, paginated, with generous margins and formatted with 1.5 line spacing. All pages are to be numbered. Each paper should include an abstract of approximately 150 words. Resource reviews may be between 1000 and 3000 words in length. Authors will be asked to use a proforma for such work. Articles are to follow conventions for scholarly work and be print ready. Any images should be high resolution.

Please note: If you are using images and figures, please contact the Editor to ensure that the work will meet print requirements.

For anonymity in reviewing, author’s name(s), affiliations, postal addresses, emails and telephone numbers should only be on a separate covering page.

References should follow the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA). Authors are asked to avoid the use of footnotes and to use endnotes sparingly. References should be cited within the text of your paper and be listed alphabetically, in full, at the end of the paper, using the APA Style.