Abstract:

This case study briefly describes aspects of the process of development of The Arts syllabus for Queensland, Australia. The curriculum development project took place over four years, from 1998 to 2001, and resulted in the syllabus itself, as well as a range of teacher-support materials including planned modules of work for each arts strand and a CD-Rom for all teachers. The paper will offer some reflections on the process of consultative curriculum development adopted in Queensland. The researcher will also report on the developing interest in drama in schools in Singapore and propose several broad considerations for arts curriculum development in general.

The development of an arts curriculum: some personal reflections.

The Years 1 to 10 The Arts key learning area encompasses those artistic pursuits that express and communicate what it is to be human through Dance, Drama, Media, Music and Visual Arts. Through these five distinct and separate disciplines, we develop, share and pass on understandings of ourselves, our histories, our cultures and our worlds to future generations. The arts, separately and collectively, can balance and enrich student experience by fostering unique and significant skills and understandings. These are transferable to other areas of learning. (QSCC 2002:1)

This is the opening statement of the syllabus for The Arts in the compulsory years of schooling in Queensland. This syllabus, to be fully implemented by 2006, is intended for study by all students in all Queensland government schools, regardless of circumstances, location, staff expertise, or facilities.

In its most direct form, the lived curriculum of the classroom is the result of the specific dynamic between the teacher and the particular group of students at a particular time. Teachers plan their classroom implementation of curriculum on a daily, weekly, term, semester and year basis. The curriculum guidelines or syllabus documents they refer to for guidance generally have been prepared by either academics, a group of curriculum officers employed full-time by a Ministry or Education Authority, or a group of curriculum developers employed on a short-term basis. This is a description of the latter.

From 1999 to 2001 I worked full-time as a project officer on this curriculum, with particular responsibility for the development of the drama strand. I would like to share with you some reflections on this particular curriculum development process and offer some considerations which may be of relevance to my colleagues and artist-educators in Singapore, where I now work.

The rational of the syllabus goes on to say:

The arts are significant aspects of everyday life. People interact with them regularly as individuals and as members of communities. The arts influence decisions and choices made every day about such things as our clothing and appearance, our natural and built surroundings, music, television programs and movies. The arts entertain, record events, promote ideas, provoke responses and stimulate discussion. They provide opportunities for us to create, reflect, challenge, ritualise, critique, and celebrate. They also play important roles in expressing and sharing the vitality of cultures and communities, in constructing
personal and cultural identities, and in transmitting values and ideas. (QSCC 2002:1)

These statements at the beginning of the document read smoothly and are in danger of being read lightly, and with broad and nodding agreement. They almost seem to state truisms rather than offer innovative and insightful reflections on the importance of arts education. Considering that these documents are written to be generally understood and broadly implemented, perhaps text such as this is integral to the nature of syllabus/curriculum documents – at least those that are meant to be implemented by non-specialist teachers. In this extract, above, every word was considered, debated (in some cases passionately) by a large network of informed contributors, many with agendas quite at variance with others in the consultative group. I hope to explain, very briefly, something of the process of curriculum development which resulted in this document.

The Queensland Process

In 1996 the Queensland Government established the Queensland School Curriculum Council (QSCC), a statutory government body, responsible directly to the Minister of Education. The role of the council was to develop syllabuses and curriculum support materials for the eight Key Learning Areas designated as the core curriculum: English, Health and Physical Education (HPE), Languages Other Than English (LOTE), Mathematics, Science, Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE), Technology, and The Arts. Enshrined in the legislation describing the role of the QSCC was the mandate to consult widely and gain agreement from the three schooling authorities operating in the State: Education Queensland (responsible for all government schools), the Queensland Catholic Education Commission, and the Association of Independent Schools in Queensland.

Because The Arts curriculum was to be compulsory for all students in Queensland government schools it had to be written in such a way to be ‘deliverable’ in all schooling contexts, including large inner-city schools, remote one-teacher schools, regardless of socio-economic status, ethnicity or abilities of students. The meticulous nature of the ongoing consultation process, with representation from professional associations, schooling systems, parent groups and groups representing students with special need, assisted in developing relevant and usable materials for all Queensland school contexts.

The QSCC adopted an ‘outcomes’ approach, an adaptation of the model developed by William Spady (1993), which outlined sequences of learning in short statements, stepping up in six levels. Each outcome states what students must ‘know and be able to do with what they know’, and each level builds on the learnings from previous levels. The final outcomes statements are short descriptions of what is essential learning in each art form. The curriculum is underpinned by a set of guiding principles which promote lifelong learning. All materials address means of making cross-curricular links by embedding literacy, numeracy, lifeskills, and a futures perspective into learning activities. The syllabus and support materials aim to be non-discriminatory, promoting equity of access and participation. Additionally they employ practices that provide means of exploring and challenging inequities in and through the arts.

The sequence of development

In brief, the phases of the project were as follows:
1. Research (6 months) Investigate curriculum documents nationally and internationally, establish processes of consultation, consult academics/researchers and writings in the field of arts education.

2. Design brief and First Draft syllabus (6 months). These documents may be downloaded from the following website: www.qsa.qld.edu.au

3. Trial and pilot (18 months). Teachers in selected schools implemented, tested and revised materials and provided feedback to the writing team. The thirty-nine schools involved in the formal trialling of materials included remote and rural schools as well as inner-city schools.

4. Development of support materials and publication of curriculum documents (2 years). Materials were developed concurrently with the trial and in consultation with schools and teachers. Additional materials were further developed as particular needs were identified.

It is clear that consultation with a wide range of stakeholders (teachers, academics, professional associations, systems/policy makers and parents and community groups) was vital to this project. However it is significant that, nowhere in the consultation process, were students’ voices heard.

_The clients or the end-users (to use two very ‘in vogue’ terms) may not feel the same way about the curriculum as many adults do, whether those adults are academics, business people, governments or parents. Young people have a view of themselves and their world, they have aspirations and dreams, and it may be that the way we currently put together the curriculum is not always able to meet these concerns._ (Brady & Kennedy, 1999:6)

It is problematic and significant that so much effort, time and expense was put in to hear the voices of adult stakeholders but so little to facilitate students contributions to this project.

**The Singapore context**

While there are extant syllabus documents for music and visual arts in Singapore there is no requirement for schools to adhere to these syllabuses, nor must schools offer an arts education as part of the general curriculum. Pre-service teacher education programmes are in place at the National Institute of Education (the sole provider of teacher education in Singapore) to support these disciplines.

**The Ministry of Education (MOE) and drama in schools**

The Ministry of Education acknowledges the importance of creativity in the curriculum.

_With the shift towards more creative thinking, teaching methodology has to incorporate more creative approaches. There must be a greater degree of tolerance for ‘divergent thinking’. The shift towards increased emphasis on critical and creative thinking skills means that curriculum and assessment must move in tandem with each other to create a conducive environment which encourages creativity._ (MOE, 1998)

With this statement being reinforced by including ‘thinking skills and creativity’ as one of the eight core skills and values of Singapore education, (MOE, 1999) we can see that the rhetoric is in place to support the inclusion of the arts as part of the core curriculum.
Table 1

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<th>Numbers of Schools in Singapore</th>
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Of the 375 educational institutions in Singapore (see Table 1) few offer Drama within the school curriculum. Only one, Victoria Junior College, offers drama at A-level. Approximately three schools at secondary level (Commonwealth, Nanyang Girls’ and Raffles Girls’) have attempted to introduce O-level drama but are still waiting for approval from the MOE. Up to thirty schools offer some drama in Lower Secondary during curriculum time or as part of the teaching of Literature, but this relies on the placement of individual teachers rather than a whole-school commitment. In most cases access to learning in drama is through participation in a CCA (Co-Curricular Activity) for the school Drama Club or ELDDS (English Language Drama and Debating Society). This would be the case in up to a hundred schools. CCA Drama is mostly production related, with a few courses focusing on the development of self-confidence and presentation skills. For CCA time nearly all schools will employ outside trainers (usually attached to theatre companies) to run workshops. In Secondary Schools and in Junior Colleges drama work is frequently in preparation for the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) competition, a biennial inter-school drama competition. Each year the competition alternates between Junior Colleges and Secondary Schools: one year students are from JCs, and in alternate years from secondary schools. Each school’s entry must be a drama performance in English (no Singlish) which lasts for thirty minutes in total, including five minutes each for bump in and bump out. Entries are judged in four areas: staging, script, performance and production. The students perform for a panel of judges but to no other audience during the competition. In 2003 there were more than eighty entries in the Secondary School competition, held over four days. The ultimate aim of all entrants is to win a gold medal and such wins contribute to the school ranking.

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1. Source: MOE website Wednesday, June 25, 2003
3. CCAs are compulsory for all students. They spend at least 3 hours per week in a CCA.
4. Singlish is commonly spoken by many Singaporeans in informal settings. There has been a concerted effort by government agencies to minimise its use.
The SYF is the most prominent and recognised vehicle for drama practice in schools in Singapore.

**The role of the NAC**

The National Arts Council (NAC), under the umbrella of the Ministry for Information, Communication and the Arts (MITA), provides a good deal of financial support for the arts in Singapore Schools. The NAC Arts Education Programme (AEP) commenced in 1993 with the main aim of developing a future audience base for the arts. There are three areas of the AEP: Exposure, Excursion and Experience. *Exposure* involves a company travelling to a school and performing for the students during assembly time (for drama this has given rise to what are called ‘Assembly Plays’). *Excursion* describes events where students go from the school to a theatre or gallery to view an arts product. And *Experience* consists of hands-on, participatory workshops for groups with a maximum of thirty.

Each school in Singapore receives a S$10 000 grant from the Totalisator Board (called the Tote Board Grant) which is to be used for AEP in the school. The grant can only subsidise programs, endorsed by the NAC. This funding becomes a subsidy of 60%, so that a program costing $1000 can use $600 from the grant, and the school must pay the residual $400. In the NAC programs, the art form that is growing the fastest in popularity is theatre. For AEP the highest number (almost 50%) offered and taken up by schools are theatre programmes. Many of these are the Arts Experience workshops, held in co-curricular (CCA) time.

**Words from some Singapore teachers.**

In July, 2002 the drama section of the Visual and Performing Arts Academic Group at NIE began to offer an Advanced Post-graduate Diploma in Drama and Drama Education. I asked some of our current students to describe the situation regarding drama education in their respective schools.

Teacher A (secondary school):

> Before I started the course Drama was restricted to activities in the drama club which included script writing and performing. However, most of the activities were teacher-centred and teacher directed, with students merely presenting the vision the teacher/s had. Using drama in the curriculum was unheard of. Now we aim to create a mini-theatre company in the school by modelling this practice with our drama club. I have introduced drama into the curriculum (Sec 1 Express Literature classes) where appropriate. However planning a series of drama lessons is itself time-consuming for someone who is new to teaching drama and, because of this, drama lessons are sporadic and are restricted to short exercises such as freeze frames and characters on the wall.

Teacher B (Primary School)

> Since starting this course I introduced Process Drama to my pupils. We teach storytelling sessions and skills during drama club activities. My aims include to integrate drama into P4 EL curriculum and to find ways of helping the students to learn science through drama.

Teacher C (Secondary School)

> Drama is used in language lessons, Literature classes and Civics and Moral Education classes. Due to the small classroom size, big class
size and curriculum constraints, drama is only used on an ad hoc basis, mostly by including conventions like role-play, tableau, hot-seating.

Teacher D (Secondary School)

*Our Drama Club performs for selected school events such as Orientation Week and National Day celebrations, collaborates in film projects, and performs for external audiences in community projects (e.g. for orphanages and exchange programs) as well as the SYF.*

Teacher E (Secondary School)

*I use drama conventions in the teaching of literature in English and have developed a Drama enrichment programme for lower sec which is compulsory for all Sec 1 and Sec 2 students. I run Process Drama with selected drama club students and we have initiated a programme of Forum theatre to help lower sec students manage stress arising from academic pressure, peer pressure, and parental pressure.*

Many of the teachers undertaking the course have expressed their disquiet about the lack of access to and support for drama in the curriculum. The ad hoc nature of the opportunities they have to use drama in their classes makes it difficult for both their students and themselves to feel familiar and comfortable with drama pedagogy. They feel concerned that there is insufficient pre-service and post-graduate teacher education in this discipline. There are also concerns about the inequitable access to drama for their students, many of whom can only gain experience through drama club activities.

**Considerations for curriculum development.**

In the development of any curriculum material it is needful to ask ourselves why should these ideas, concepts or disciplines be included in the curriculum? How do they relate to the social and cultural contexts of our students and our shared futures? How do we underpin the curriculum with shared principles and values. We should consider the timing of new curriculum in the broadest context as well as that of what age group is most appropriate to begin learning in this way and how the development of learning will be structured.

In considering the ‘what’ or content of a curriculum we need to consider the ‘privileging’ of selected forms and content and ask ourselves what selection will best serve our community in the future.

It is undeniable that teacher support, both in pre-service teacher education and ongoing professional development is vital. Ideally ongoing professional dialogue and discourse will be facilitated.

Arts educators and researchers still have to grapple with the issues surrounding assessment and the arts. We must document efficient and valid means of assessing progression and learning in our arts forms and recognise the limitations of standardised and pen-and-paper tests.

In conclusion I leave you with some questions:

- Do we consider our students as art-makers or art-absorbers?
- Should we broaden consultation processes to include students? How can they be empowered to share their ideas, interests and concerns?
- From which canon/s do we draw the substance of our curriculum?

And finally:
How can we keep arts curriculum alive, dynamic and developing?

References:

Madonna Stinson lectures in Drama and Drama Education at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. Previous to this, Madonna worked as a curriculum developer for the Queensland Studies Authority (formerly the QSCC) where she was a major contributor to Arts/Drama syllabus documents for Years 1 to 12. She was Head of Department at two high schools in Queensland, Australia, and has taught at all levels of primary school. She is the author (with Debbie Wall) of Dramactive 1, a drama text book for junior secondary school students, published in 2003 by McGraw-Hill, Australia. She is currently undertaking a PhD, which focuses on curriculum development in drama and has recently commenced a research project investigating the contribution of drama to the development of oral communication skills.