

K-10 History - **The devil isn't in the detail.**

The NSW Board of Studies has published the new K-10 History curriculum based on the Australian curriculum. In many respects it differs little from the old NSW syllabuses reflecting just how much the NSW curriculum has influenced the development of the Australian curriculum. There are some good points about this arrangement, but also some problems and missed opportunities.

A contested curriculum

The construction of **curriculum is always both small “p” and big “P” political**. For many years, the History curriculum has been the focus of politics as everyone with an interest tries to get into the curriculum what they consider essential for students to know. There has been an Aboriginal lobby, an Asian lobby, a civics lobby, a migrant lobby, a human rights lobby, a religious lobby, a contemporary content lobby and others. All of these groups have wanted the curriculum to reflect their interests.

In the new K-10 History curriculum, some of these groups have been winners - Aboriginal, migrant, Asia - and others losers. In making such comments, one must spare a thought for those constructing the curriculum. Teaching time is finite, especially in secondary schools, and not everything can be covered. This curriculum tries to be more accommodating to the lobby groups by creating depth studies that are options. But not everyone will be happy, and there seems from as much an impartial view as possible to be some omissions and issues still to be addressed.

It is interesting to consider what is mandatory in this K-10 History curriculum and what is optional. Therein lies the successful lobbyists and possibly any bias by curriculum developers.

Mandatory studies

The first point to note is that there is little choice in the primary K-6 curriculum. Apparently, primary schools can not be trusted to deal with a wider set of content by providing options. This decision is one that affects the secondary curriculum contributing to crowding and a much greater use of options to solve the problem of too much content.

Primary students study - their and other families, their local community, Aboriginal history in their or another local community, cultural differences, first contact with Aboriginal people, colonial life, frontier conflict, gold rushes, migration and migrant groups, Federation, 20C Aboriginal history and migrants. Sounds very Australian but there are some requirements to look at cultural and spiritual differences in drawing comparisons with other families and local communities and in looking at celebrations in other countries. It is very Australian dominated and studies in the history of other countries and peoples are merely tangential, being neither significant nor in depth.

In the secondary school, a study of principles of archaeology is compulsory but the societies in which these principles are to be studied are through a small list of options. Then in viewing the Modern World, students are to have a brief overview of the Roman world and the spread of Christianity and Islam, the key features of Medieval world, the Renaissance and Enlightenment before a series of depth studies from a number of listed options. In their final two years of mandatory study of history, students have a core study of Australia at War and then a series of **options plus a study of the school's own choosing.**

Unlike the primary school, very little is mandated which raises the question about what is it that students should know and exposes the curriculum to all the lobbyists who can not see where their interests are made known to all students. Have the curriculum writers found the job all too much and opted out by creating many options and focussing on the skills required to study history as the unifying factor? The question remains, what history is most important for students to study to prepare them for the life ahead of them. Value judgements are required, because some histories are more important for these students to know and understand than others. Applying skills to understand multiple perspectives is only part of a satisfactory answer. Deciding what content to apply these skills and perspectives to is the job of responsible curriculum writers. They need to chose content, give rationales for their decisions and then stand firm. Majority opinion is not always right, the squeakiest voices need not be indulged and right action has never been solely a matter of consensus.

Ancient history

I am not aware of any strong lobby group for ancient history. If there was, I would have thought that it would have tried to break the previous hold the NSW curriculum had of excluding ancient history from primary schools. In late primary school, students seemed to always really enjoy the exotic cultures of Near East, Egypt, Greece and Rome. But since the implementation of the NSW HSIE K-6 curriculum, such studies have been the preserve of the secondary school. Here was an opportunity to rectify this situation and to reengage primary school students in more than Australian history.

Repetition

One of the eternal arguments in curriculum writing is whether important material should be repeated at different ages. A spiral curriculum attempts to do this with students revisiting material at several points in the continuum. While there are good arguments to repeat certain content, the K-10 History Syllabuses does so in some strange ways but it is not a spiral curriculum.

There is a disproportionate attention and time given to migrants. Stage 3 has a focus on migrants including migration, migrant groups and a case study of a man/woman/group. Stage 5 delivers more attention to migration and migrants in Depth Study 2 Making a nation which not only revisits Federation, but focuses on migration. Migration also appears as a focus in Depth Study 5 The globalising world.

There have been attempts to limit repetition of Aboriginal history but a close examination of the content is of concern because some matters are repeated and some very important content, for example, Aboriginal missions are left out. Missions have been one of the most controversial aspects of Aboriginal history and one would have thought that a warts and all approach would have been core content.

Some concern should be expressed that there is room in the curriculum for a school developed option but not for some core content that all Australians should know about. Is this an example of curriculum developers making hard decisions about content or opting out of their responsibility?

A hole of mammoth proportion

Trying to satisfy everyone is a mission impossible for curriculum developers. One must be careful in criticising their judgements about what should be included. I can not expect my pet topics to be included just to suit me. So the bigger question is whether there is any glaring omission. Is there a topic that every student should have studied to understand world history and the world they live in today?

How about the Reformation? Given its impact on the history of the last six centuries why has it been omitted? Can you actually understand world history, especially the history of the western world without this understanding? Is it possible to understand the world we live in today without understanding the impact of the Reformation and its continuing effects?

The curriculum does well to look briefly at the Roman world, the impact of Christianity and Islam and the key features of the Medieval world. However, what happens from that point to today is more explained by religious beliefs, and the politics that accompanied them, than probably any other cause or factor. The omission of the Reformation from the curriculum is nothing short of astonishing and again leaves the writers open to criticism of a secular bias where they have misunderstood the meaning of secular as including general religious education. If the Australian curriculum writers can not get it right, it does not stop NSW from getting it right. The Board of Studies and indeed the Government should act to include an understanding of the Reformation to help students not only make sense of their history, but also the world they currently live in.

In the event that the Australian curriculum writers or the NSW Board of Studies **won't admit an error in this matter and continue their defensive arguments, my** advice would be to use the school option to teach the Reformation and to do so at the beginning of Year10 so that students have the background study for other Depth Studies.

A false dichotomy

For secondary schools, the curriculum in NSW and now the Australian curriculum demonstrates a strong discipline focus where attempts to integrate subjects like history and geography have been resisted. It has long been the belief that discipline studies deliver a better quality curriculum with subsequent outcomes for students. The general acceptance of the Australian curriculum world indicate that other states, many who have followed a broader study in the area, have come into line. This acceptance should not be interpreted as some superior intellectual win for NSW as curricula around the world would indicate that integration has its own success stories, especially in the hands of a good teacher. But for now, the focus is disciplines.

However, in the primary schools an integrated approach has been the norm. Whether based on themes, connected outcomes groups or focus questions teachers and textbooks have been free to follow an integrated approach. If history is to be taught as a separate subject in the primary school teachers may need both additional training and guidance in breaking from their favourite units of work to pick up the new curriculum. Teacher resistance to curriculum change is always high, especially if that change is into an area they feel less confident about. Teaching history in primary schools may be a more difficult task for schools to implement than many educational bureaucrats and politicians care to admit.

In time, a new geography curriculum will need to be taught in primary schools. The relationship between this syllabus and history will be of interest to observe. Integration may yet prove a more powerful way to deliver curriculum to students in primary schools.

Specificity

While the whole history curriculum may at first appear overbearing to the classroom teacher, the developers have done well to retain much of the NSW curriculum, to make sensible decisions about core content and to give teachers some scope for school based decisions. **But it's not an "A". Significant content has** been marginalised to options and some essential material omitted. The devil is not in the detail but in the big picture allocation of time to the selected core and options. The developers will always be able to justify their decisions by pointing at aspects of the curriculum where most teachers can squeeze in their favourite content for a few periods, but I always thought curriculum was about what was best for students and only secondly teachers.

Conclusion

The arguments will continue about what is not there and what has been emphasised and not about the detail. Teachers have considerable freedom, perhaps too much, at the expense of core understandings for all students.

John Gore