

A Visual Arts Curriculum Requires Vision

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Abstract:

The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum draft, was launched by the Hon. Dr. Nick Smith, then Education Minister, on 12 May, 1999. It states that; "Dance, drama, music and the visual arts develop the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of human experience. They contribute to our intellectual ability and to our social, cultural, and spiritual understandings. They are an essential element of daily living and of lifelong learning" (Foley, Hong & Thwaites, 1998, p. 8).

Despite its promises, the Visual Arts component of the draft curriculum is struggling to meet the "intellectual...social, cultural and spiritual..." needs of New Zealand students and teachers. The aim of this paper is to identify the criteria needed to teach visual arts in New Zealand and decide if the draft document meets these criteria.

New technology is accelerating worldwide, yet New Zealand is facing the prospect of becoming a static, utilitarian society. Health, education and welfare sectors have ceased to move forward, caught in a bind between clients' rising expectations and taxpayers' mistrust of social spending. The economy is dogged by unemployment, lack of export strength, overseas debt and foreign market control. Electronic communications are changing the face of the workplace as we know it while our talented youth head offshore, lured by job prospects in a larger, more stimulating world market.

The conventional wisdom believes that social problems are a result of a weakened education system. This attitude is in danger of undermining educational autonomy and teacher professionalism. Political pressures determine that teachers are faced with servicing a client-led outcomes-based curriculum, a system espoused by the New

Right and one which is already impacting heavily on the way subjects are taught in schools.

It is into this political climate that the draft of The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum (ANZC) has arrived. The last of seven curriculum documents to be written, it heralds the final stage of requirements for the New Zealand Curriculum Framework to be made law. The four disciplines of dance, drama, music and visual arts have been combined to form one learning area, Nga Toi / The Arts. The parallel document, Nga Toi, written in Maori, is due out shortly.

Prior to the ANZC, visual arts educators were following the 1989 Art Education Syllabus. The syllabus adopted a progressive approach to modernist theories. Advocating self expression and aesthetics, its emphasis was on using sources of motivation which were child-centred. It encouraged teachers to assess non-competitive individual achievement and ability levels. Criticism of this syllabus helped to shape the guidelines which followed. It was seen as elitist in its support for a stand-alone visual arts culture, and lacked a socially critical aim. Published in 1991, the Guidelines to the Syllabus dealt extensively with planning. Throughout this document, New Zealand art, particularly contemporary art and Maori art, was modelled as the primary focus for appreciating and knowing about Art and its place in our society.

In 1998, the ANZC was written to replace the 1989 Syllabus and to complete a set of seven curricula which, it was hoped, would reflect the 21st Century needs of New Zealand society. In reviews of the visual arts discipline of the ANZC so far, criticism has been divided. Either a) the document is too esoteric, the language is difficult and it is not prescriptive enough, or b) the document is too prescriptive, tied too strictly to achievement objectives and outcomes, and lacks vision. My argument supports the latter of these positions.

The Argument

I would argue that:

- the draft curriculum document for The Arts does not go far enough to encourage visionary teaching and the development of higher order thinking in NZ education;
- the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (NZCF) from which the learning area curricula have been drawn, contains fundamental flaws;
- the draft curriculum has not built upon the best practices of

teaching art from the syllabus but has instead established a hierarchy of learning by integrating structural levels and achievement objectives;

- assessment in the arts, a vital link to programme validity, is being compromised.

The following is an elaboration of these points.

Criteria needed to support a more visionary document

It is important to identify the criteria desired to teach the arts in New Zealand and decide if the ANZC meets these criteria. As Hall (1993) states, "performance criteria should focus on understanding and not on meeting a highly measurable behavioural objective". Educators need to move away from the outcomes based criteria of assessing a product and develop criteria of process, the beginnings of holistic assessment.

The following criteria outlined by Eisner in his 1998 essay "Does Experience in the Arts Boost Academic Achievement?" are essential performance criteria when aiming for quality in teaching and learning:

- A willingness to imagine possibilities that are not now, but which might become;
- A desire to explore ambiguity, to be willing to forestall premature closure in pursuing resolutions;
- The ability to recognise and accept multiple perspectives and resolutions.

These outcomes challenge the logic-based reasoning that can appear too certain for the creative process. They are difficult to assess. To prepare teachers to assess them would be a step towards realising that Art is an intellectual pursuit far removed from "crayons and paint on a Friday afternoon" (Smith, 1999, p. 3).

The definition "Visual Arts" restricts the scope of Art

The words "visual art" denote to students the paintings and drawings of the culture, eurocentric in particular. "Visual representation is a measurable skill. The arts we see, feel, touch and think are far broader than this ... they create and negate three dimensional space" (Boyask, 1999). At the same time as the arts "create and negate three dimensional space," their aim is to challenge students to "imagine possibilities, explore ambiguity, and recognise and accept multiple perspectives and resolutions" (Eisner, 1998). By accepting that visual arts are just art we "see", we are losing sight of the vision of what Art could achieve; the

scope of motivational ideas, inspired teaching and challenging assessment opportunities. Throughout this paper I have replaced the words "visual arts" with Art.

Rationale for requiring a more visionary document

Most administrators are pleased that the ANZC places the arts firmly within the structure of the national framework, and assert that a curriculum is not meant to be "visionary". Yet, the mere fact that this draft curriculum has not shared a vision and is not clear in its purpose, has produced diametrically opposed criticism of its content.

Art, as do the sciences, reflects the emerging abstract thought of cognitive development. They are "both important means of enquiry into, and finding explanations for, the phenomena of our world" (Art Education Syllabus, 1989, p. 20). Art makes us look harder, see further, create changes that are true paradigm shifts. In the 14th Century, scientists invented telescopes and opened up the universe, artists invented the vanishing point and created perspective. In the 19th and 20th Centuries, scientists moved to the macroscopic, the 4th dimension, (Rutherford, Einstein) and artists constructed pointillism and abstraction, (Seurat, Mondrian, Kandinski, Picasso). Abstract art was a deliberate and measured event. "Mondrian apparently had constructed the correct proportion with his lines, proportions that vibrated in the human brain, a direct correlation of neuro-biology and art" (Wilson, 1998). It is this type of vision and challenge that education frameworks need to adopt with Art. As the background paper states, "The arts are another way of looking, another way of seeing, another way of knowing" (Foley, Hong & Thwaites, 1999).

The theoretical framework to support these criteria

Educators need to understand cognition development in order to help students to think, see and feel more effectively. Constructivists believe that learners don't transfer knowledge from the external world into their memories; rather, they actively generate meaning from experience.

This view was strongly affirmed in 1994 by the OECD, Harvard's Project Zero, (Gardiner, Perkins). It defined intelligence as multifaceted, and argued that the arts significantly develop the students' ability to communicate in multiple modes.

In order to teach art in a constructivist pedagogy, teachers need to first establish what the student understands and knows about art. In an open-ended learning environment, the teacher guides students towards "enculturation" (Driver, 1993) and self assessment. A post-modernist

document, the ANZC places Art in a social context, thus enabling the schools to simulate “real” world learning. “Genuine conceptual learning involves the intertwining of interaction with the environment and formal instruction” (West & Pines, 1995, p. 3).

Children will only modify their ideas when they are convinced that they are achieving success by making links with new ideas, producing, perceiving and reflecting (Foley, et al. 1999). The resulting feeling of satisfaction motivates students to make sense of what they are experiencing. Interaction with their Art, coupled with the vision and skilful guidance of educators, will create the environment children need to generate meaningful learning experiences.

Flaws in the New Zealand Curriculum Framework

The NZCF (1993) incorporates an “evolutionary” set of nine principles (Wood, 1993), seven essential learning areas and eight groupings of essential skills, which are to be taught in context (NZCF, p. 17). Achievement levels, clarified by examples, are broadly outlined on an eight level scale and it is clearly stated that “in any one class, students will be working at different levels and will be working at their own rate while being encouraged to strive for higher goals” (NZCF, p. 9). Attitudes and values are recognised as important but there is no framework given for their transference into schools.

With this structure in place, is the NZCF sufficiently visionary to off-set these skills-based curricula? Critics say it is not an adequate framework for what is important in teaching and learning in Art. It does not list creative skills in its definition of essential skills and does not acknowledge the holistic approach to education. Manins (1999), while expressing deep concerns with The Arts curriculum, blames flawed principles in the NZCF which are not in keeping with 21st century learning needs. His argument is that the “awe” factor is missing. He maintains that the framework is

... biased towards scientific knowledge and that it needs to be re-written with appropriate balance between the verbal, scientific, technological, competitive aspects of contemporary society and other ways of thinking. This revision would give appropriate recognition to experience that can transcend the domination of the three-dimensional world, experience that is not measured by quantification or economic efficiency; whose goals include beauty and quality of life.

This holistic approach, where symbols function as a language and cooperation as a social value, is preferable to the reductionism of the NZCF.

A paradigm shift from modernism to post-modernism

Wood (1999) identifies a major paradigm shift. Mainly modernist in its inception, the NZCF has been the framework for curriculum documents influenced by and written in terms of postmodern philosophy. The framework’s two overall philosophies, progressivism and constructivism, have been shaped by the liberal-humanitarian policies of the 1940-70s (Beeby, Tovey), the 1980s reviews and the early 1990s shift towards socio-economic imperatives.

The writers of The Arts background paper have demonstrated a conservative postmodernist position on curriculum content and refer to Doll (1989, p. 251): “The broad goal would be to combine closure with openness, performance with development, right answers with creative solutions and processes”. Because the NZCF incorporates principles that can be identified with this statement, particularly the third (flexibility) and fifth (life-long learning), Wood has advised that the draft document meets the policy specifications of the NZCF and “demonstrates rigorous eclecticism with respect to the philosophic approaches adopted”.

Critics like Manins disagree. They believe the NZCF needs to be re-written and that the similarities are not strong enough. As a predominantly modernist document, the NZCF is not flexible to theoretical change and is closed to challenge. I refer to Dryden (1993, p. 119) when he asks; “How can we get a better balance between the physical-intellectual and the metaphysical-spiritual aspects of reality?”

Essential skills missing in the NZCF

I believe that the list of essential skills should incorporate expressive skills, artistic skills, performing skills and discriminating skills, therefore, bringing the link between the framework and the learning area into better balance. The NZCF (p. 17) alludes to these skills by stating; “These categories encompass other important groups of skills, such as creative skills, valuing skills and practical life skills”. However, it does not value them enough to list them. Without a doubt, focus on the essential skills contributes to success in learning. They give teachers guidelines that are not directly content-driven, yet are “essential” to learning, and include the planning and teaching of higher order thinking skills. According to the background paper, “Students conceptualise, problem-solve, define, refine and give form to ideas in

the arts through the creative processes of art making" (Foley, et al. 1999). This acknowledges process aspects which are critical to The Arts.

The personal challenge of problem solving

"Within appropriate contexts, problems emerge out of dilemmas presenting a personal challenge and learning arises when means are sought to resolve those dilemmas" (Lave, 1988). The NZCF emphasises problem solving throughout. The ANZC promotes the use of inquiry processes in social context thus allowing students to assume the role of audience and critic, yet it does not actively foster problem solving which is "...a central (though largely neglected) aim in education" (McCormick, 1997, p. 2).

The maker or presenter of an artwork needs to develop literacy in order to structure ideas and communicate meaning. So too do viewers and listeners, in order that they can interpret the work in an informed way as they bring their own perceptions, experiences and values to it. (ANZC, p. 9)

With this social context in place, it is the "personal challenge" of problem solving, the metacurriculum of imagination, which needs to be addressed. "The arts foster critical thinking because in the visual arts we seek a variety of solutions to a single problem" (Nebraska, 1996). As with constructivism, it is the emerging dilemmas of problem solving, the jumping together, or conciliation, of ideas (Wilson, 1998) that meets the criterion of "recognising and accepting multiple perspectives and resolutions".

Building on existing good practice

When changing curricula and attempting to raise the standards in education, it is important to build on the best practice already established in the learning area. "There is widespread evidence that fundamental educational change can only be achieved slowly, through programmes of professional development that build on existing good practice" (Black & Wiliam, 1998). The reconstructionist approach is to actively construct the future from the values and achievements of the past and include all stakeholders in that construction. This means including students' values in creating future directions for The Arts. The ANZC writers maintain that the four strands reflect and build "on the principles of the existing syllabus and the essential features of visual arts theory, criticism and best practice." (Foley et al., 1998).

The 1989 Syllabus provided a sound base for child-centred art practice, but is not acknowledged as a starting point for teacher development in the new curriculum consultation. I am not advocating that we return to using the 1989 Syllabus, although it is a preferable document when searching for a theoretical home for Eisner's outcomes – imagine possibilities, explore ambiguity, recognise multiple perspectives and most importantly, forestall premature closure in pursuing resolutions. The lack of structure within the 1989 Syllabus gave educators scope to accommodate differences and create open-ended challenge. The introduction of levels and strands, although tying the ANZC to the overall curricular framework, is potentially damaging to "social, cultural, and spiritual needs" if it inhibits the scope of learning and teaching. I believe adherence to the levels may do just that.

A hierarchy of learning within levels and achievement objectives

The eight level hierarchy leads the student through art exploration to art analysis and investigation. Skills and knowledge construction are considered to evolve through succeeding experiences. Yet where is the encouragement for generalist teachers, those who usually require the most guidance from an arts curriculum, to teach the fundamentals of student research and self assessment at Level 1? Conversely, there is a need for an achievement objective that supports the enjoyment and challenge of an open-ended programme at Level 8, one of exploration which "seeks ambiguity and multiple resolutions." These guidelines would create an opportunity for educators to challenge the higher order thinking skills of their students.

When teachers are being required to teach to prescribed achievement objectives, as broadly written as they are, will there be "room for evaluating outcomes that were not necessarily anticipated" as the 1989 Syllabus advocates? In principle two of the NZCF, innovative teaching is coupled with measuring progress against clearly defined achievement objectives. Confident teachers will explore the value of unexpected learning outcomes and encourage children to "achieve objectives to the best of their ability" but this is not clearly stated in the curriculum document. This points to the need for professional development to target and encourage this confidence.

Strand confusion

The background document states: "The strands and achievement objectives enable the learners to extend as well as revisit prior learning

experiences through a continual cycle of action and reflection" (Foley et al., 1998, p. 41). During The Arts draft consultation process, confusion between strands became obvious when teachers were asked to match statements to main headings for each of the four strands. This activity highlighted how closely the first two strands interlink. The strands are meant to relate without hierarchy. "The order in which they are presented is not intended to indicate any particular planning sequence" (ANZC, p. 12). Yet presented in a 1 to 4 linear format, teachers may use them as such.

It is my contention that Strand 1, "Learning the Processes and Procedures of the Visual Arts" and Strand 2 "Developing Ideas in the Visual Arts" be further clarified. Whereas exploration and problem solving of materials and processes are essential, it is the motivation and development of ideas, and the personal relationship with that motivation, which is the starting point for teaching and learning in Art.

"Sources of Motivation"

The most important content area of the 1989 syllabus, *Sources of Motivation*, is now implicit within the four strands. The brief phrase, "develop and extend ideas from a variety of sources of motivations" is a Strand 2 bullet point. Is this enough guidance for generalist teachers to understand the nature and importance of motivation?

It is widely understood that quality motivation is essential for good teaching practice. It is not so readily acknowledged that students can motivate their teachers, themselves and their peers. In order to do this more effectively, they need to learn the concepts of aesthetics and the terminology of possibilities. The ANZC draft repeatedly uses the words "generate", "describe" and "investigate". This directive is process driven, extrinsic and measurable. Visionary teaching uses the language of inspiration: "imagine", "explore", "challenge", and "create". As much as we need measurable achievement objectives, we also need the balance of that "awe" factor.

Intrinsic motivation embraces ambiguity while it actively promotes the exploration of possibilities. "To be creative, one must take seriously something nobody else has paid attention to." (Gardiner, 1999). This challenge is an open-ended invitation for students to explore their own values, needs and environment. Without intrinsic motivation, the importance of anchoring learning to the child's own perspective, a constructivist premise, is in danger of being overlooked.

Assessment as a vital link to programme validity

"Research...has demonstrated time and time again that assessment has a powerful effect on shaping both curriculum content and teaching methods" (Hargreaves, 1989). Poles apart from Eisner's criteria, the achievement objectives in the ANZC could limit the scope of teachers' judgement and assessment possibilities. Flockton, one of the architects of the National Education Monitoring Project (NEMP), says in his report on school-wide assessment:

The need for new approaches and methods of assessment is well illustrated in the areas of Social Sciences and The Arts. In these curriculum domains, which are critical dimensions of learning for life, little has been available by way of precedent, nationally or internationally in large or small scale assessment, to guide and inform or develop valid assessment tasks. (1999, p. 33)

We have to ask ourselves the question, "What kind of learning do we want?" and then devise the assessment type that will encourage this learning (Willis, 1993). Assessment should take place within the learning context, and student self-assessment is essential to programme validity (Black & Wiliam 1998, p. 10). If we aim for the criteria Eisner proposes, we can maintain teacher judgement as the link to meaningful Art teaching and assessment.

What do schools need?

Schools want a clear vision, inspiration, and a "fire in the belly" reason for restructuring their overloaded timetables to include The Arts in a vigorous manner. In order to achieve the goals of critical awareness coupled with intuitive outcomes, they need a policy document and a teaching framework that inspires quality learning and manageable assessment practices.

To support this need, the ANZC is attempting to improve on the 1989 Syllabus, which lacked sufficient guidelines in assessment. To further strengthen these guidelines, I believe that *Action and Reflection* (p. 74) should be included with *Assessment*. Action and Reflection, a "dynamic process that unites theory and practice" (ANZC, p. 74) acknowledges the students' role in evaluation. Evaluation which is shared between teacher and student increases validity and fitness for purpose.

Apart from the NEMP results, there has been a paucity of guidance in Arts assessment for the generalist teacher. In a recent ERO report (Winter, 1999), there is even a question hovering over the need to assess

The Arts in the primary grades at all. This is a worrying possibility. Teachers gain vital information about children, and about their programmes, through The Arts. Why teach the Arts if they're not seen to be important enough to assess?

Conclusion

"Keeping in mind the shift in educational philosophy, will the new curriculum document provide a clear vision and the dynamics needed for 21st century education in The Arts?" (Smith, 1998). Consultation and debate continue. From the eloquent persuasions of Rousseau to the assertions of the Business Round Table, political lobbyists have always tried to influence the direction of education. Should we heed Marcuse's (1966) warning of the paralysis of criticism? Are individual aspirations and ideologies being neatly boxed into a "one dimensional" curriculum that is serving the dictates of the vocational, as opposed to educational, New Right?

The ANZC claims positive implications for the future of the arts in education; structural and philosophical unity with other curriculum documents, more Maori content, inclusion, and an emphasis on technology, yet it avoids the expressive and holistic experience that is not measured by quantification. Its "mix and match" of theoretical frameworks has clouded the potential for sharing a clear vision. "Art celebrants" (Eisner, 1998), while interpreting their world and engaging an audience, should be "exploring ambiguity, imagining possibilities, and accepting multiple perspectives while developing an arts literacy."

In order to prepare themselves for the implementation of this document, "... it is teachers' responsibility to familiarise themselves with the language, as they have had to in respect of the specialised language of all other subjects" (Smith, 1998, p. 11). When preparing assessment tasks teachers should ensure authenticity and "... look at more naturalistic sources of information about how people around the world develop skills important to their way of life" (Gardiner, 1987).

It is crucial to the health of Art that schools communicate their successful assessment programmes and develop a sound basis for reporting. Because Art is difficult for some teachers to assess does not mean that it should not be assessed at all. "Effective useful change can occur when everyone is involved in the process" (Foley, 1994, p. 13), and teachers as visionaries, not "compliant agents" will be leading that change.

Recommendations

In respect to the points I have made in this brief review of recent developments in the visual arts curriculum, I have the following recommendations to make:

- that the visual arts discipline of the ANZC draft be re-written to incorporate a more visionary tone using Eisner's outcomes as a guide;
- that the NZCF be reviewed and revised within a post-modernist paradigm;
- that the essential skills of creativity, performance and discrimination be added to the NZCF;
- that the eight achievement levels in the ANZC become *guidelines*;
- that *Sources of Motivation* be promoted more fully;
- that *Action and Reflection* becomes part of *Assessment*.

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