CONCEPTUAL STRUCTURES AND STUDIES OF SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT: SHIFTING SANDS OR IS THE BEACH BARE?

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INTRODUCTION

Social Studies has been a contested area for over a century in many countries. Typically the focus has been on inter – or multii-disciplinary approaches at the primary school level and separate subjects including history and the social sciences at secondary school level but this can also vary widely between countries and over time.

According to Ross (2001) social studies has had, and is having, an identity crisis. There is a need for a subject that addresses the real problems of the 21st Century society, and in particular a social justice perspective with opportunities for students to think and act responsibly. Yet, no clear consensus of how this might be achieved has emerged. In an earlier volume, Gilbert (1984) refers to the 'aspiration and failure in the social subjects'.

The initiative in Australia in the early 1990's to create a new school subject, "Studies of Society and Environment" (SOSE) was either commendable and worthwhile or shortsighted and pragmatically sterile, depending upon your point of view. What is needed is debate about the conceptual structure. Research studies are needed urgently to examine the impact upon schools, teachers and students. Does SOSE have an integrity of its own? Can it be justified as a worthy reconceptualisation of the field?

These questions and related issues are examined in this paper, in an attempt to discover where the "shifting sands" are heading and to see if there is anything "left on the beach" to develop and refine.

Shifting Conceptual Structure for SOSE

USA

In the 1910's in the USA, the term "social studies" was used to categorise history and the social sciences (Evans, 2000). The National Council for the Social Studies, formed in 1921 had a wide, consensus definition of social studies – it includes history, government, economics, geography and sociology (NCSS, 1923).

Massive government funding for curricular reform, brought on by the Cold War and Sputnik, led to an era of the new social studies, where social scientists, such as Fenton and Senesh emphasized the structures and concepts of the

academic disciplines. Rice (1992) refers to "a sense of electricity in the air, of expectancy and high hopes in the 1960's – there was to be rich rewards in teaching the social sciences as intellectual disciplines (p.224)".

Alas, this did not happen. By the mid 1970's the New Social Studies had run its course and the revival of history became the dominate trend. This was followed shortly afterwards by the creation of curriculum standards for history, geography, economics, civics, psychology and social studies (Ross, 2001). It is interesting to note that the single discipline standards were quite specific and had detailed requirements about content and processes. By contrast, the social studies standards create only a broad framework of themes (Mathison, Ross, Vinson, 2001)

Many US writers concede that in the current standards emphasis, social studies as an entity will be eclipsed and perhaps this will lead to its early demise (Haas and Laughlin, 1999).

Australia

Separate subjects, predominantly history, geography and civics, were the accepted ones at primary and secondary schools in Australia for many decades. A change was heralded in 1967 when a UNESCO conference on the teaching of the social sciences was held in Melbourne (Marsh, 1976). The momentum was continued with the establishing of a National Committee on Social Science Teaching in 1970 and a number of seminars and workshops were held in many states (Marsh and Stafford, 1988).

It should be noted that there was far from agreement on whether the term "social studies" or "social sciences" should be used. State education systems provided social studies syllabuses (Marsh, 1976) but there was still considerable interest in the scientific methods of the social sciences. It was not surprising that a middle path was chosen for a new national curriculum project in 1975 – it was titled the Social Education Materials Project (SEMP) (Marsh, 1983).

Whether there were significant further changes in the organisation of social studies / social sciences in schools in the 1970-80's is doubtful. The next major curriculum event to occur was initiated by John Dawkins, the then Commonwealth Minister for Education, who used the term 'education in crisis' (Dawkins, 1988) to introduce his agenda. Notwithstanding the rhetoric and the 'crisis mentality' he was largely responsible for ushering in a major change.

The creation of eight learning areas in Australia by the AEC's Curriculum and Assessment Committee (CURASS) was an ambitious undertaking (Wilson, 1993). It promised so much, but in the end delivered so little.

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The conceptualising of studies and society and environment by CURASS is an interesting case and illustrates Hannan's (1992) comment at the time that the creation of the eight learning areas was both pragmatic and conservative – "this is the break-up nearest to that already in use around the country" (p.29).

For example, Joan Kirner (Kirner 199) the then Victorian Education Minister, exerted considerable pressure to have 'Environment' feature prominently in all learning areas (Marsh, 1994). Its final home became studies of society and environment (SOSE). Career and work education was also considered to be important to include in SOSE (Marsh, 1994). The inclusion of business studies mainly in SOSE reflected the strongly established grouping of the social sciences and commerce in Victoria.

All of these political pressures at the time led to compromises, but in the long term have caused conceptual difficulties for SOSE.

It might be argued that the general conceptual structure of SOSE as determined by CURASS can be justified. The 1993 version comprised:

- Time, continuity and change
- Place and space
- Culture
- Resources
- Natural and social systems
- Investigation, participation and communication

It is a similar conceptualisation to that produced by the National Council for the Social Studies in the US (Marsh, 2004). Quite a few of the Australian states (but not all) followed this conceptual structure for a number of years (especially Tasmania, Western Australia, ACT and South Australia) (Kennedy, Marland, Sturman and Forlin, 1996).

Yet there was evidence of disquiet from the beginning, especially from history specialists in NSW and Victoria. This surfaced in NSW in 1995 where, as a result of the Eltis Report (1995), the national structure of learning areas was largely rejected. Similarly, with the production of the Curriculum and Standards Framework II (CSFII) in Victoria in 2000, separate disciplines of history, geography, economy and society instead of SOSE concepts, were re-instated at the secondary school level.

In 2001, the South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework was introduced into South Australian schools. Although four strands are retained (time; continuity and change; space, place and environment; societies and cultures; and social systems) they are now interconnected with five essential learnings and three clusters of shared values (SA Department of Education and Children's Services, 2004).

In Tasmania, the recently introduced Essential Learning Framework has a central focus on higher order thinking and the major curriculum organisers relate to thinking, communicating, personal futures, world futures and social responsibility (Hanlon, 2004). Currently, these five curriculum organisers are being linked with the five SOSE strands (1993 SOSE structure developed by CURASS).

The New Basics Project in Queensland is another major development with its emphasis upon four New Basics (life pathways and social futures; multi-literacies and communications media; active citizenship; environments and technologies) and rich tasks which are integrated, problem-based tasks established for three year spans, Years 1-3, years 4-6 and years 7-9. Productive pedagogies have been developed which support teachers' classroom efforts to focus on integrated problem-solving.

The New Basics Project is particularly interesting because of the extensive trialling that is occurring over four years and the research program which involves the collection of qualitative and quantitative data. The project will also be externally evaluated.

Another recent initiative is the move by the Federal Government to establish four domains of nationally consistent curriculum outcomes (Nelson, 2003). The four domains include English, mathematics, science, civics and citizenship. Advocates of SOSE could well be very disappointed, if not enraged, that SOSE or a variation of it, is not one of the four, unless we take the very simplistic stance that civics and citizenship is a reasonable proxy for SOSE.

Statements of learning for each of these four domains are currently being developed. For example, the draft statement for English is currently being circulated. As noted by Homer (2004) this draft statement simply represents a mapping of existing English documents to establish a tabulated set of outcomes. He considers the draft English statement to be ==atheoretical== and fragmented. It continues the use of strands, levels and outcomes, which, as noted elsewhere in this paper have never been researched in terms of their viability.

This brief survey of current conceptualisations of SOSE in a number of Australian states clearly demonstrates diversity – a state of flux – and that there is very little evidence that the 1993 conceptualisations of SOSE are still intact. Whether the new conceptualisations of SOSE will survive more than a few years is problematical. As noted by writers in the 1990's (Willmott, 1992; Reid 1992; Marsh 1994) there were never any substantial arguments/ theoretical underpinnings published about the original conceptual structure of SOSE. Further there have not been any evaluative studies of the outcomes based model which is embedded in SOSE and the other seven learning areas

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(Matters 2004). Of the new forms currently available, only New Basics has a substantial theoretical basis and this is linked to a credible research study.

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What are the alternatives?

If it is the case that SOSE as we know it is in a considerable state of flux – that the current flurry of alternative conceputalisations represent hasty creations – the 'shifting sands have almost denuded the beach' – where else can we go?

One option is to explore / refine / develop conceptual structures for SOSE that are more relevant for the 21st Century. For example, the New Basics Framework developed in Queensland, as described above, holds considerable promise. As noted by Matters (2004) this framework does successfully combine knowledge categories (cultural transmission) with generic skills (higher order thinking skills).

Some educators content that a SOSE approach can address current societal issues and still achieve deep understandings of discipline-based concepts.

Evans (2000) argues that an issues-centred curriculum is the only solution. He states that only an issues-centred curriculum can:

- Prepare thoughtful, knowledgeable, clear-thinking citizens
- Enable students to undertake meaningful social inquiry (p.293)

He argues that it could be possible, even desirable, to have issues-centred units within discipline-based courses.

Thornton (2002) highlights the importance of integrated-process approaches, citing as examples over the decades of the Rugg materials in the 1930's (Russ, 1939), the Harvard Social Studies Project in the 1960's and Man: A course of study (MACOS) in the 1970's (Marsh and Stafford, 1988).

However, Thornton (2002) concludes that these integrated-process approaches have always faced an uphill battle to secure legitimacy. He contends that the current conservative wave and emphasis upon standards will make it very difficult for integrated approaches to get accepted.

The other option is to reconsider the value of studying separate disciplines, especially history and geography.

Klee (2002) stresses the power of history as a school subject – its power is both reassurance and challenge. History provides "reassurance" for us in that in many ways our problems are not new. It is a "challenge" in that it alerts students to the possibility of newness and change.

Whelan (2001) notes that the locus of inquiry of history is the complex relationship between the past and the present and that is why it is the subject best suited to serve as the core of social studies education.

Australian writers such as Taylor (2002), referring to the National Inquiry into School History, concludes that "school history is unique. It is essentially different from other associated disciplines because of its adductive nature (speculative, imaginative, vicarious, persuasive) and its idiographic underpinning (deals with individual events and individual matters of fact) (p.8)".

According to Robertson (2003) "Geography is the discipline best equipped to make contributions to the new curriculum discourse (p.20)". She contends that dealing with complex issues and interrelationships between people and place relies on the geographer's tools.

Wilson (2002) takes a stance for essential content and argues that none of the eight KLA's have any inherent conceptual rigour. He notes in particular the burial of key content and skill areas in SOSE, to the disadvantage of history and geography.

The focus upon discipline-based studies at lower secondary levels in NSW and Victoria is now established and appears to be gaining momentum in other states. The next question, of course is, what happens if there is a reversion to the teaching of separate disciplines in all states? Will the teaching of history and geography as separate subjects still enable high-order skills and deep understandings to develop? Will it be possible to address important contemporary issues if a discipline-based approach is generally accepted?

Kincheloe (2001) warns of the dangers of a retrogression to a rigidity of unexamined facts – the history hell of memorisation. Paxton (1999) notes that any enlightened approach to the teaching of separate disciplines will also need to consider major changes to the authoritative writing style of history textbooks – "the notion of written history as a voiceless, dispassionate reporting of past events would seem to be an anachronism in this postmodern age (p.316)".

Still, this alternative to SOSE does appear to hold some promise and the enthusiasm of current advocates of history and geography approaches is having an impact.

From the evidence presented in this paper, and considering the educational contexts of state and territory powers and jurisdictions, the alternative likely to be successful in the near future is a discipline-based approach but one which takes a far more interpretive and postmodern approach to the disciplines. For example, Kinchoeloe (2001) argues for students to be meaningfully involved in learning the disciplines and developing critical perspectives. Gregory (1994) contends that postmodern approaches are needed in geography "to "displace" and "dislocate" the unselfconscious pose of geographic objectivity which underlay the West's mapping of the world (p.135)".

If this stance is adopted, "Studies of Society and Environment" (SOSE) will simply be a label for the disciplines included within it. Another option, of course, is to remove the SOSE label entirely or to revert back to the generic title "social studies".

Concluding Comments

The analysis of SOSE and its development in Australia, as outlined above, is far from encouraging. Whether the original conceptual structure of SOSE was deficient from the beginning is a serious matter. The current moves ("shifting sands") in many states and territories to create different conceptual structures seems to indicate that this is indeed the case.

The alternative of developing a new conceptual structure for SOSE is one option. An excellent example of what can be achieved is the New Basics Project in Queensland.

The other alternative, which appears to be achieving growing support, is a refocusing on individual disciplines, especially history and geography. However the new discipline approaches promise to be different – by incorporation higher order thinking activities and a greater emphasis upon generic skills. Perhaps, this is the more likely of the two options and in which case, the SOSE title becomes nothing more than a convenient label for social subjects.

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