

THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE
NATIONAL CURRICULUM SYMPOSIUM
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Convenor's opening remarks

Professor John O'Toole
Chair of Arts Education
[Lead Writer for the Arts: The Australian Curriculum]

Ladies and Gentlemen

Here is an announcement. *The* Australian Curriculum. It's being created as we speak. In case you didn't know.

What is a curriculum? Most people assume it's what gets taught. But as most teachers and kids know perfectly well, what gets taught and what gets learned are often quite different. The curriculum as lived is different from the curriculum as taught, and that too is different from the curriculum as written. Part of the challenge of any curriculum, like this one, is to bring the three together.

What does the word mean? Going back to the grammar is no help. As many of you know, Curriculum is descended from the Latin Currere, to run, which you'll note is a verb. But a curriculum is not a verb. It's a thing, a noun – we have **A** curriculum... in fact **The** Curriculum, noun, singular. The word has no verbal form: we don't currick together, more's the pity. The curriculum is a thing given to us by someone, and the verb we have to do is *follow* it.

The someone who is giving us this one, just like Australia's first public curriculum in Victoria in 1872, is Government. Government has made it very clear what its priorities are, and this rhetoric has dominated the public debate in the media. Above all it wants to improve the career prospects of young Australians through increased literacy and numeracy, and standards in these which surpass the rest of the world, as judged on measures like the PISA tests. In this their aims are remarkably similar to those of the Report commissioned by another Victoria in 1861, just prior to England's first state curriculum:

The duty of a state in public education is to obtain the greatest possible quantity of reading, writing and arithmetic for the greatest number.

Few would argue, then or now. But is that all? Is that and that alone enough? Much of the media rhetoric around this curriculum, especially in the Murdoch Press, has been drawing battlelines between depth and breadth in education and fighting on one side or the other. However, the first task in this Symposium is to question whether breadth and depth **are** opposed and incompatible, or might they be complementary? This very debate was on in earnest back in the eighteen sixties, and our first keynote speaker tonight, Robin Alexander, has acknowledged his own allegiance to Matthew Arnold, famous English poet and Her Majesty's Inspector of Schools, when Robin was pleading the position of the complementarity of breadth and depth to the British Government just a decade ago. He might have chosen to use Arnold's own words:

Intelligent reading... when children... possess it they owe it not to the assiduity with which they have been taught reading and nothing but reading, but ... far more to the civilising and refining influences, the current of educated people's ideas and knowledge, in the midst of which they have been brought up.

The founding fathers of Australia's own first public education act, here in Victoria, would no doubt have been well aware of the debate, and probably Matthew Arnold's words. They weren't overly concerned with the exact curriculum, as it happened: they were so cock-a-hoop with their glorious victory in getting a secular education system passed that they hardly bothered about what actually got taught, as long as it wasn't religion. The 1872 Victorian Education Act relegated the curriculum itself to less than half a page in an appendix. However, it did broaden what it stipulated children should learn beyond reading and more reading with a curriculum based on at least seven-and-a-bit subjects:

Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, Grammar, Geography, Drill and where practicable Gymnastics; and sewing and needlework in addition for girls.

Have you noticed, that's not at all dissimilar from our new seven-and-a-few-bits subject-based Australian Curriculum. We've swapped drill for science, broadened out grammar into languages, found ourselves a history to join geography, and widened needlework for girls into arts for boys and girls... and gymnastics is still in the 'where practicable' basket which

is now called Phase 3 subjects. Talking of grammar, yesterday our Minister for Education, Julia Gillard stated how proud she was that our New National Curriculum for the first time in our history is including grammar. Well she was wrong – it was in there at the start.

However, this isn't 1872.

QUE SERA SERA?

This curriculum is explicitly to be for the 21st Century (or rather what's left of it). In our world where *information* about almost anything is instantly available, and the world's sum of *knowledge* doubles at rapidly shrinking intervals, can those seven-and-a-few-bits provide the *wisdom* that young Australians need to deal with all that information and knowledge?... And not just at work, in the five or so careers they may expect to have in a working life nowadays, but also in their whole personal, social and cultural lives?

WILL IT BE RICH ENOUGH?

One word which would never have found its way into a nineteenth century curriculum is creativity. The last thing the nineteenth century power-brokers wanted from their budding workforce was creativity or independent thought in an age where change meant social instability, and compliance was the duty of not just the underclasses, but all classes in their appropriate stations. Now, when change is the only constant, creativity has become one of the most desperately sought-after qualities for today's and tomorrow's young people. Will this curriculum foster or develop creativity?

WILL IT BE CREATIVE?

The 1872 and the 2010 curricula share their structure built on seven-and-a-few-bits subjects – which for throughout the hundred and forty years in between have overwhelmingly been seen and taught as distinct and different areas of knowledge. But is that distinction anything more than a misleading metaphor disguising a much more complex tangle of information and knowledge?

Will this curriculum disguise the complexity of learning through delivering isolated subjects bobbing around watertight but alone on the boundless sea of knowledge, or worse, get hopelessly snared and sink in the sargasso weed tangle of information? Will it instead be coherent enough to foster wisdom?

WILL IT BE COHERENT?

Giving or at least pointing towards a positive answer to these questions is the job of this Symposium, and you, as the experts and key stakeholders in the field, have the responsibility and the power to do it, and turn those positive answers into the reality of schooling for the present and the future.

Here I must pay tribute to the people who have the job of carrying out the whole enterprise: ACARA, the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority. From the start, ACARA has been entirely supportive of this Symposium. Of course they don't want to oversee an impoverished, uncreative and incoherent curriculum. So they are here en masse. The Lead Writers of all seven-and-a-bit subjects are here, to share their vision on those three keywords. So is Chair of the Board Barry McGaw, who will give the Reflective Keynote on Day Three, Senior Curriculum manager Rob Randall, who will provide us with insights on Day Two, and the bulk of their managers and project officers. They have explicitly stated that they are here to listen, not tell us what to think or do. ACARA wants to hear your views: both your positive answers and recommendations, where you can, and also those areas and issues of concern where the word curriculum cannot be a magic solution to learning needs and problems.

We have designed the Symposium to give them something to listen to. After tonight, most of the time will be spent in discussion groups, where you will get to hear and speak to other stakeholders whom you won't necessarily often have access to. These discussions will be focussed in two ways: by four keynotes by distinguished international educators, two of whom will set the parameters for us tonight, and give us plenty to think about. Then, the distinguished Lead Writers will share their vision of those seven-and-a-bit subjects, but not for long. We're calling their addresses Keyholes not keynotes. We think they should be able to tell us in less than fifteen minutes what their subject will contribute that is rich, creative and coherent. Then it's over to you.

I won't say "Let Battle Commence" – that's far too adversarial a metaphor. Instead, "Let the Feast Begin".

Professor Robin Alexander

And as the very rich entree, we're delighted to welcome Professor Robin Alexander, with some relevant and pungent insights for us, though not necessarily comfortable ones. Professor Alexander is one of the UK's most distinguished educators: Professor of Education Emeritus at the University of Warwick, and past President of the British Association for International and Comparative Education. Among his prolific publications, many of us are familiar with his great opus, *Culture and Pedagogy*, which besides being a meticulous and massive piece of research is also a great read. He is in Melbourne on a Miegunyah Distinguished Visiting Fellowship. His current professional position is Fellow of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and it's what he's been doing there for the last five years which concerns us tonight. He recently published

Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review

This independently funded review has already had a massive impact in its home country, apparently startling the Government and the media about equally. England, as we are so often told, has had a National Curriculum for twenty years now, and many Australians are looking towards that as our model for the Australian Curriculum too. We'll let Professor Alexander tell us himself about the Review's findings, and how far the UK is a worthy or appropriate model to follow.

Professor Robin Alexander.
