

Curriculum: making good decisions

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Teachers, in accordance with curriculum standards, must decide what children need to learn. There can be no 'one size fits all' curriculum. As teachers, we know that every student is different, and we acknowledge this by adjusting our curriculum and teaching to facilitate the inclusivity of all students.



Establishing Prior Knowledge

Before making any decisions about what to teach, it is essential to determine the existing knowledge of students, the depth of this knowledge and, most importantly, their understanding of this knowledge. All students begin their education with prior knowledge and a variety of existing skills. The constructivism theory of knowledge suggests that new knowledge is always acquired through previous experiences and understandings. Consequently, a student's prior knowledge and experiences will affect the way that they interpret concepts and solve problems (Marlowe & Page, 2005). If a student's initial understanding of a topic is not determined, if not evaluated, prior to teaching, their ability to build and acquire new knowledge could be adversely affected. It is therefore vital that we form strong and definitive connections between a student's prior knowledge, and the new information we wish to impart. As teachers, we recognise that new knowledge cannot be successfully built on a foundation that is fragile or, indeed, non-existent. Assessing where, and the extent to which, student's prior knowledge is weak, is a critical part of the teaching/learning process.

Testing for prior knowledge occurs in many different forms. For units of inquiry, we have tools available such as a KWL:

- **K:** What do I already Know about this topic?
- **W:** What do I want to learn about this topic?
- **L:** what have I Learnt about this topic? (*completed at the end of the topic*)

A student's prior knowledge can also be assessed using a simple concept map. This is an assessment tool that visually demonstrates the relationships between concepts and ideas. Concepts are linked by words that detail the connections between thoughts. This helps students to organise and structure their ideas, allowing them to further develop their knowledge and understand new information. A brief glance at a concept

map can provide a teacher with a clear, visual representation of what their students already know and understand about a particular area of the curriculum.

A crowded curriculum?

Recently, a review was conducted by the Australian Government to evaluate the development and implementation of the Australian Curriculum. The excessive amount of content was one of the key issues documented in the review (Department of Education, 2014). During the investigation, teachers and principals identified time as one of the greatest challenges involved in delivering the new expansive Australian Curriculum. It is clear from the review that teachers are struggling to find the time to actually teach the requirements of the new curriculum. The review revealed that whilst teachers endeavoured to attain high standards in 'the basics' there was little time for thinking, reflecting, problem-solving and exploration.

It seems that curriculum overload is a problem faced not only by Australian teachers, but by teachers all over the globe. A recent study was conducted on curriculum overload in Primary Schools at an international level. Many teachers from a range of countries reported that they had insufficient time to fully implement all subjects within a school's curriculum or to teach all of the requirements within a subject (NCCA, 2010). Many teachers in this study also felt that they had insufficient time to meet the needs of all learners (NCCA, 2010). This is not surprising, given the layers of responsibility bestowed upon all teachers, both pedagogical and administrative. Teachers need time to plan, time to teach, time to assess, time to deal with students who have issues beyond their learning needs, time to correct and time to communicate with parents.

Curriculum overload has, at times, been both the catalyst for, and often the consequence of, revision and reform of the



primary curriculum in many different parts of the world (NCCA, 2010). Influences on the curriculum have included: pressure on education systems to reflect changes in society, to raise standards in literacy and numeracy, to simplify the curriculum and make it more manageable, and to develop learning outcomes that will prepare pupils to be lifelong learners and active participants in society (Pepper, 2008, in NCCA, 2010).

It is worth noting that where testing in primary schools is perceived to be high-stakes, as has been the case in England, for example, the curriculum is reported to be distorted, as teachers 'teach to the test'. The problem then is that subjects not tested are pushed aside by those that are (Cambridge Primary Review, 2009, in NCCA, 2010). It can also be claimed that this occurs in some Australian schools who teach to the biennial battery of NAPLAN tests.

Integration

In a crowded curriculum, what do we remove? Addressing the social, emotional, cultural and developmental aspects of learning are equally as important as addressing the key curriculum areas such as English and

Mathematics. I would strongly argue that a possible solution to managing the overbearing content is integration. Support has come from academics identifying the benefits of an integrated approach in an attempt to rationalise the school curriculum in light of the exponential knowledge explosion (Brady & Kennedy, 2010). An integrated approach to curriculum delivery allows students to make more connections in their learning and further see the application of their studies to real life. An integrated curriculum is an educational

fashion, by different teachers. However, with thorough planning, integration is possible. By way of example, urban development can be taught from both a historical, geographical and civics perspective. Schools need to view education as a process for developing abilities required for life in the twenty first century, rather than separate, isolated subjects.

Assessment - adjusting to your curriculum

Assessment is a critical part of the teaching and learning process. Not only does assessment offer insight into student learning, it also provides educators with feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching strategies. Teachers must assess student learning in the context of daily teaching, and must modify their curriculum based on their assessments. Formative

assessment enables teachers to identify areas where students are struggling to understand, so that adjustments can be made to teaching strategies and curriculum plans. Formative assessment allows teachers to collect information that can be used to improve teaching

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approach that prepares children for lifelong learning and this, surely, must be one of the ultimate goals of teachers.

Cross-curricular priorities can be embedded into the key learning areas and the key learning areas themselves can also overlap. This may be more challenging for secondary school teachers, where disciplines are taught in a more explicit

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and student learning while it is occurring in the classroom. This immediacy of modification can therefore be a dynamic component of a student's education.

Formative assessment tasks will vary depending on the curriculum area, but can include tools such as graphic organisers, diagrams, summaries and reflections. Formative assessment focuses on what students' know and, just as importantly, what they do not know rather than on reporting what they still need to learn at intervals throughout the year.

Electronic Technology in the Curriculum

As a beginning teacher, I believed that the more experienced I became, the easier it would be to decide what to teach in the interests of unveiling students' potential and thereby contributing to their cumulative contributions to a dynamic society. My beliefs were misplaced. At the start of my teaching career, the primary school curriculum focused on reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, science, history and geography. Almost a decade later, it is also necessary to teach my students how to use iPads and laptops, how to be safe online, and how to touch type. Electronic technology is most certainly an area of the curriculum that is attracting a growing amount of attention due to its increased societal importance. Instruction in this facet of the curriculum is now implicit and I anticipate that the amount of curriculum time devoted to it will increase steadily over the next decade and beyond.

Many years of research has documented the effect of the appropriate use of electronic technology in educational settings. Research has clearly shown that new technologies can enrich and expand learning experiences, and can increase student productivity (Heide &

Henderson, 1994). Electronic technology invariably assists students to become improved, rational and logical problem solvers. It increases their motivation and allows them to take more responsibility for their own learning (Heide & Henderson, 1994). This emanates from a closer ownership of a problem and its solution than was the case when more traditional methods of instruction were employed.

Finding the time to incorporate electronic technology into teaching can be difficult, but I firmly believe that it should be a priority. Students need to learn to use electronic technology in the same way they learn all other skills and disciplines, at their own pace and in their own time. This will allow students to become confident users of electronic technology at school, in the work place and as lifelong learners.

Final Thoughts

The curriculum we deliver should change and evolve constantly. It must respond to developments in society, as well as the changes in students' individual learning needs. As teachers, we know that every student is different, and we acknowledge this by adjusting our curriculum and teaching to facilitate the inclusivity of all students. The Australian National Curriculum provides all teachers with a broad framework of what they should teach and what students should learn. However, it is the teachers who will ultimately have the final say on how to organize and translate the curriculum into classroom delivery.

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Anne is presenting a series of online workshops for TLN in 2015 on assessment. Go to www.tln.org.au for more details about those programs.

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