

Chapter 16**A Critical Commentary
Indiana Study Group**

Commentaries are important. They set things in context and help readers to remember the quest. In that spirit, we wish to tell readers that this volume is first and foremost a research study intent upon finding ways to make education — specifically post-compulsory education in Australia — more effective.

Given the wide variety of subject areas covered in post-compulsory education (everything from English to Rural Science), the wide variety of teachers and teaching styles, and the wide variety of students being served, the study provides rich insights into the literacy–curriculum relationship. We know of no other study like it. Because these experts from Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America couldn't go to the field, the designers of the study brought the field to them, and we benefit from their insights and the multiple perspectives they offer.

This chapter is meant to serve as a study of the study that is reported in this volume. As members of the group charged with writing this overview, we began by reading and re-reading each chapter, and then moved into the task of creating a one-page summary of each one. Once we had created summaries of the 14 chapters, we looked across them for patterns and anomalies. One pattern we identified early on was not surprising, nor unexpected. It reflected the wide variety of literacy demands made on students and the multiple conceptions of literacy in classrooms that the authors of this volume studied. Such variation can be attributed to the dozens of different courses being offered in the rural and metropolitan schools of New South Wales and Queensland, as well as to variation in individual teaching styles and in the diverse ways in which teachers conceptualise their roles in the classroom.

A second pattern we identified reflected common issues and concerns that were reported by the researchers who analysed the data. Given the diversity in courses, schools and teachers, this pattern was somewhat surprising. Our subsequent attempts to investigate this anomaly in light of our own experience with, involvement in, and thinking about how to create more effective schools for the 21st century led to conversations to which we found ourselves coming back again and again. These conversations supplied the foundation for this chapter, which is framed around the common concerns identified by the experts in their findings. They include knowledge issues, teaching issues and curriculum issues.

For our study group, this was an inquiry project that involved not only many hours of solitary reading and summarising, but also many hours of collaborative discussion as we critiqued, extended and synthesised our thoughts. This chapter provides an opportunity for us to share these common issues and concerns, and to invite a larger group of educators into our conversations. To this end, we pose needed conversations that need to be sustained over time. Since the common issues and concerns focus on knowledge, teaching and curriculum, there is no doubt in our minds that they merit further exploration by those who are interested in charting a course for future reform in Australia and the rest of the world.

Knowledge: Issues from the study

Researchers in this study reported that, across a wide variety of courses, knowledge was generally not perceived as something that is socially constructed. This would have required that meaning was derived not only from the material presented in class, but also from a transaction between what was presented, the personal meanings students brought to the situation, and the social contexts and cultural norms of the classroom. Instead, they found that knowledge was perceived as ‘ready-made’ information to be learned (Chapter 10) or as a set of data to be memorised with no questioning or critical analysis of content (Chapter 13). Cambourne (Chapter 7) noted the existence of ‘correct forms of knowledge which exist independently of the knowers and learners ... In these classrooms the role [of literacy] became that of a conduit for facilitating the flow of information from an authoritative source to the students’ minds’.

Knowledge was also seen as a pre-packaged set of facts in Agricultural Science and Biology lessons analysed by Wilson (Chapter 10), who decided that the vocabulary used in these lessons determined the amount of emphasis placed on conceptual knowledge, thinking and communication. In a 26-minute segment of the lesson, Wilson identified 48 concept-label words used by the teacher. These words were not used in daily speech or in other academic subjects. According to Wilson, students concluded that these words had single, fixed meanings, and that the text was the authority for these meanings. She saw this emphasis on nomenclature as a product of viewing science as a collection of ready-made factual products to be received and internalised by students. Concept-labels appeared to be accompanied by the uninterrogated assumption that there is a ‘correct’ meaning associated with each label, and that there is one-to-one correspondence between the object and its label. This orientation supports the notion that students must learn the body of ‘ready-made’ science before they can use their intellectual processes to reason like real scientists.

A needed conversation: Seeing knowledge as socially constructed

After analysing literacy practices in post-compulsory classrooms, a number of the researchers concluded that students did not construct knowledge as often as they received ready-made knowledge. The teacher or textbook was the repository of this ready-made knowledge, and the students simply had to learn the factual information on which they would be tested. Students assumed roles that related to the kind of knowledge that mattered in their classrooms. In many cases, this meant that students were test-takers, test-markers and responders to teacher-initiated questions.

Several researchers concluded that the ways in which knowledge was defined in the classrooms they studied limited certain types of learning and participation, as well as the access teachers had to student displays of learning. Members of our study group wondered how these learning engagements would look if learning were situated in contextualised events that allowed students to make personal sense and gave teachers the maximum opportunity to observe displays of their learning. The potential for such maximisation is created when teachers and students engage in collaborative talk (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992) and joint problem solving.

Collaborative talk helps teachers and students develop a sense of belonging to a ‘community of literate thinkers’ (Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). These authors caution that the goal of education must be for students to go beyond the knowledge they have appropriated from their culture, in order to solve new problems. If this is to occur, teachers must provide opportunities and encouragement for students to engage in their own constructive efforts. Teachers must appreciate that allowing students to engage in dialogue with them and with peers provides opportunities for joint problem solving.

A needed conversation: Interrogating knowledge

Researchers found that, in schools across New South Wales and Queensland, knowledge was generally perceived as a set of facts to be learned, with no questioning or interrogation of these facts or of the positions of the people who collected them. This occurred across the curriculum in such diverse courses as Legal Studies, English, Economics and Science. Instead of dwelling on the problems of this uncritical stance in enacting the curriculum, we believe there is more to be gained from considering how critical discussions might be built into the current curriculum. For example, Legal Studies courses could be ideal places for beginning critical discussions that examine how class topics are affected by issues of politics, economics, class, gender and culture. Even traditional textbooks could be catalysts for lively discussions if students and the teacher were to interrogate the ideology of the authors and decide who ‘wins’ and who ‘loses’ if the authors’ perspectives are accepted as true.

Once teachers and students start to interrogate the knowledge presented in their courses, they can move into other forms of critical discourse. Literacy can then be used as a way for students to understand themselves and their culture, with an orientation toward social action, equity and justice (Shannon, 1995).

A needed conversation: Deconstructing classroom inequities

One group of findings reported various types of inequalities that were present in classrooms. Davies (Chapter 6) observed a Health and Physical Education class in which a few female students were being co-operative, focusing on the lesson. They supported the authoritarian male’s position as teacher, and helped to direct the learning of the class. Meanwhile, the males separated themselves from the female students and teacher, and resisted the feminist values in the lesson. Since the teacher did not create a social space that was equitable for all students, there were several silent females who remained on the fringe of the lesson.

Christie (Chapter 9) identified another inequality present in many classrooms. The instance she observed was in a Biology class, where students were asked to explain in written form ‘how the reproductive strategies of the red kangaroo are suited to the Australian environment’. Since the teacher did not give students an overview of this genre of writing, Christie concluded that some students would be unable to complete the task in an appropriate manner. She pointed to this as an example where those equipped by prior life experience and opportunity would be successful, while those who lacked such experience were denied access.

Similar incidents where students were asked to complete assignments with no help on how to do so were prevalent in many of the researchers' analyses. We suggest that teachers consider using demonstrations, discussions of the strategies or steps that might be useful in accomplishing these assignments, and rubrics of what should be included in quality work. Knowledge of these strategies could put those students who haven't already attained such expertise on a more equal basis with others in the class.

A needed conversation: Fostering student voice

In a Year 11 English class, Christie observed a lesson where students were asked to analyse, develop an opinion and write an argumentative paper on 'How do role models on television influence children's socialisation?' The teacher spent a lot of time talking about his own views about the negative influences of popular films and TV programs. By expressing these strong moral imperatives, it became almost a subversive act for students to express an opinion contrary to the teacher's.

If the intent of the course is to build students' capacity to analyse issues, take stands on issues and then argue for their stands in writing, then it is essential to enact teaching strategies that foster building these capacities in students. This means creating the time and opportunities for teachers to become more skilled facilitators who encourage the articulation and development of student voices and perspectives, even unpopular ones. From these few examples, we hope to stimulate thinking about different ways in which teachers and curriculum planners might move toward integrating critical analysis and conversations into the current post-compulsory curriculum. A question that might begin the conversation is: 'How can we begin the process of transforming our classrooms into places where we and our students regularly deal with issues of ethics, power, politics, diversity and social justice?'

Teaching: Issues from the study

Two main teacher roles were identified by the experts who studied the Australian data. The first role was that of a 'more capable other' and the second was as a manager or controller. The teachers who adopted the role of more capable other were characterised as having high levels of personal interaction with students. Street (Chapter 13) gave an example of a teacher of Information Processing and Technology who assumed that everything needed to be explained to his students. This teacher appeared to interact with the students more than others, raising points, asking questions, getting responses to which the students themselves have some input, rather than simply repeating the textbook phrases. Crawford et al. (Chapter 4) described a teacher who took on a similar role in a Mathematics class. The teacher communicated his belief that the student was capable of succeeding in the engagements at hand, even though he had trouble initially. When the student needed to modify what he was doing, 'the teacher took up the role of more capable other' by providing information and by illustrating the process involved in working the mathematical problems.

Similarly, Wyatt-Smith (Chapter 11) observed a Marine Studies teacher using a pattern of talk–demonstration–guided application. Students received feedback during the hands-on practice. In contrast, there were many more instances where teachers adopted the

role of manager or controller. For example, Street (Chapter 13) observed that the teacher's two primary roles in the English classroom he analysed were to maintain discipline and to give instruction on procedural knowledge. Kress (Chapter 3) also noticed this predominant focus on procedures in the English class tapes he analysed.

Cambourne (Chapter 7) described the tremendous power and control held by a Legal Studies teacher who called the shots on who would read, who would speak and what the content would be. He also pointed out how compliant the students were — a theme noted by many of the authors in this volume.

Christie (Chapter 9) summed up this phenomenon with her observation that 'while English as a school discipline is often publicly talked up for its commitment to the development of capacity in students to express independent opinion, it is in practice often quite authoritarian about the capacity it affords students to express unpopular views'.

A needed conversation: Teaching for diversity and difference

One of the important facets of our ongoing conversation about teaching relates to culture. Too often, we have concluded, culture is only discussed in global terms such as ethnicity and race. Unfortunately, much of the professional conversation about the interface of culture in schooling happens at this global level.

Cole (1996) define cultures as everyday experience. Cole believes in a diversity model of education that supports the expression and exploration of difference at a deep structural level, where difference sets up tension and propels learning. A diversity model of education changes how we think about teaching. Diversity and difference are seen as possibilities rather than problems. Several of the researchers in this study espoused a diversity model of education, but found few examples in the classrooms studied.

Lemke's (Chapter 15) focus on literacy as a semiotic system and the need for students to develop competencies in multiple literacies is another theoretical construct important to a diversity model of education. His work highlighted the notion that students need to develop and use different interpretive systems. He argued that the development of these systems would be strongly impacted by the culture of the student.

As we read the 14 analyses which make up this volume, we saw little evidence of culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994). What we saw in the Australian classrooms was a pull toward consensus and conformity that far outweighed any consideration of diversity. The educational system seemed to work against diversity and difference by narrowing the acceptable knowledge outcomes. Teachers appeared to be preoccupied with working through texts and preparing students for tests.

Curriculum documents and assessments represent some sort of agreement about the knowledge and skills students should learn. They categorise learning into discipline strands and reduce the real world into what are thought to be manageable chunks, inevitably leaving many kinds of knowing and doing outside the parameters of school. Teachers are expected to take up the particular goals outlined in their curriculum guides, and students are expected to pass specific tests. With these common elements of schooling comes an

unavoidable measure of conformity. At its worst, all students are taught the same things in the same ways, because education operates on the commonsense notions that sameness is equitable, and that systematic assessment is the best way to track students' achievement. Ultimately, the question of diversity is a question of what we value. What these studies show is that cultural orientation is routinely overlooked in many post-compulsory classrooms. We view this as unfortunate, and encourage others to join us in exploring new ways to envision teaching and learning.

A needed conversation: The role of inquiry in teaching

We argue that questions drive enquiry, and that enquiry should drive teaching. Teachers who are enquirers see themselves as learners who share many characteristics and needs with their students. They know that nothing is more powerful than authentic questions. They compel learners (large and small, old and young) to gather new information and to create personal theories. Learners working to understand the ambiguities in their own lives and knowledge are far more invested than learners who are following a pathway laid down by someone with a different set of cognitive and social experiences. Learners following their own questions have to assume responsibility for constructing their own understandings. They know that the goal is not to arrive at the final authoritative answer to their question, but rather to achieve a temporary understanding that can change in the future, given new experiences and information (Short et al., 1996).

The point is that an inquiry into schools, and not by the teachers and students in schools, may change only the written curriculum and supporting documentation, not the knowledge or teaching practices of the individuals who work within the context. Teachers who are involved in inquiry may begin to change their ways of interacting with students. They may also begin to understand the dynamics of the process and to develop the ability to release their hold on all the authority for the curriculum. This makes more space for students to make choices and to be engaged in meaningful processes of learning. At the same time, teachers are able to support students in using language and literacy for more purposes and with more people.

Curriculum: Issues from the study

A third commonality reported in a number of chapters in this book was a tendency for teachers to regard textbooks and tests as 'the curriculum'. For example, Crawford et al. (Chapter 4) reported that the English teacher they observed could be seen as handing over to the workbook and printed test, the role of authority on the content of English. The teacher spent the period managing test-taking and test-marking procedures, while expecting students to obtain content information from their workbooks on their own.

In addition to identifying and examining the literacy demands of post-compulsory curriculum, the 14 experts also uncovered a hidden curriculum. According to this unstated curriculum, students were required to memorise authoritative knowledge (usually presented via textbooks), to accept this knowledge as 'truth' that was not open to interrogation or debate, to speak only when called on by the teacher, and to passively and compliantly

repeat this routine day after day. This appears to be counter-productive — especially in context of the 21st-century world in which these students are living.

At the same time, however, the researchers also uncovered a powerful local resource that holds promise for school reform — the teachers themselves. Throughout these chapters we were introduced to teachers who demonstrated high levels of personal interaction with their students and who encouraged collaboration. How can educational reform build on their strengths? When teachers talk to other teachers on a regular basis, the potential arises for making implicit, unconscious theories and beliefs about learning and teaching visible. This is a first step toward unmasking the hidden curriculum — making it explicit, public and open to examination and interrogation.

A needed conversation: Curriculum as conversation

Carolyn Burke (Harste, Short & Burke, 1988) says that the function of curriculum is to give perspective. Too often teachers get caught up in the day-to-day operation of schools and forget where they are headed. To ‘think curriculum’ is an opportunity to think about what we value and, in the process, to answer for ourselves the age-old question, ‘What knowledge is worth teaching?’

The authors in this volume have both implicitly and explicitly answered this question. The answers that they provide go well beyond specific concepts to be transmitted in order to address principles or ideas that ought to govern instruction. For example, Winograd (Chapter 8) argued that literacy should involve real-life issues, and that reading and writing should be viewed as tools that help us to solve real-life problems. Davies (Chapter 6) wanted to see teachers and students acting on a commitment to hear every voice, to value and build from the diversity of possible positions and lived experiences; to be responsible social agents.

These answers are very different from those of traditional curriculum experts. Hirsch (1987), for example, has gone to great lengths to identify what he considers to be key concepts that everyone should know. He views such concepts as ‘common knowledge’, and their absence in curriculum as enough to cause a breakdown in society as we know it. Recently, Applebee (1996) has argued that Hirsch’s approach to curriculum development reflects a fundamental misconception about the nature of knowledge and learning. Curriculum developed in this manner teaches traditions rather than how to participate actively in knowledge construction and learning.

In order to redress this situation, Applebee asks us to think of curriculum in terms of what conversations we wish our students to engage in. He argues that, by thinking of curriculum in these terms, we invite students to explore past conceptions as well as participate in current debates; debates which reflect the vitality of the discipline and its relevance for life. Real knowledge, he argues, arises from participation in conversations that matter and ‘are themselves embedded within larger traditions of discourse that we have come to value, such as science, the arts, history, literature, and mathematics’ (p. ii). In our work in schools and in teacher education, we have found Applebee’s view of curriculum to be liberating. Instead of transmitting facts, we begin by thinking about what

conversations we want learners to engage in with us. In the process of exploring a topic such as ‘What does it mean to think mathematically?’ students explore old answers as well as current thinking. They are invited into the conversation as participants, rather than made to feel as outsiders, mere spectators of a sport they probably can’t play. Curriculum as conversation invites students in, allows them the opportunity to explore multiple perspectives.

A needed conversation: Multiple ways of knowing

Currently, post-compulsory curriculum is organised around the disciplines. Students take a variety of classes such as English, Art, Physics, Physical Education and Legal Studies, as we attempt to provide them with access to multiple ways of knowing about the world. Each discipline has its own vocabulary, methods of inquiry and tools for operating on a specific area of interest. Cumming (Chapter 14) noted that the students she observed appeared to move easily from one disciplinary class to the next, adjusting to the language and ways of doing things without much difficulty. This flexibility may be a valuable characteristic to develop in young learners, but the equally important skill of synthesising what can be known through the application of multiple disciplines was seldom practised in the classes analysed in this study. Thus, the curriculum never delivered on its promise of creating individuals who can think clearly about real-world experiences that inevitably cut across disciplinary boundaries. It seems that in the rush to prepare students with multiple ways of knowing, educators ignored the importance of processes that weave across the disciplines and force the evaluation of what each discipline can contribute.

As language educators, we are keenly interested in how language is used to learn, but we also believe that we need to start talking about the role of sign systems other than language. Like Kress (Chapter 3), we believe the semiotic perspective is helpful in that it enables us to recognise that meaning-making goes on in multiple sign systems, and that different sign systems provide different ‘affordances’. For example, art expresses feelings and social commentary better than mathematics. Mathematics expresses relationships and patterns better than drama. Drama expresses human interaction and story better than photography. And so on.

As humans, we have developed multiple sign systems because we are cognitively complex individuals who live in multi-dimensional cultures and contexts. We have invented a variety of modes of representation that focus on different aspects of our world, and require different performance skills.

Lemke argued that we cannot make meaning in a way that activates only one sign system (language, drawing, gesture, music etc.) at a time. Rather, we weave together ‘multiple literacies’ whenever we learn, especially in the study of a discipline like science. In order to understand a science concept as a scientist does, a student must be able to deal flexibly with its verbal, mathematical and visual-graphic aspects. Lemke also suggested that the integration of multiple literacies is what makes conceptualisation possible, for the different perspectives provide a more complete view of any complex phenomenon.

It makes a difference how educators think about literacy. Is it one thing that develops across the disciplines, or is it multiple and likely to develop differently in

different disciplines? What happens to literacy development when individuals have different first languages? How does access to different sign systems affect learning? What new hybrid genres (that is, hypertexts, interactive video and virtual reality), will develop as computers become a more prevalent part of teaching and learning?

In our study group discussions, we agreed that thinking about multiple sign systems has changed us as teachers. We no longer assume that our students learn only through language; we are more conscious of their use of multiple sign systems. We also attempt to develop their skills (and our own) in using sign systems other than language. In order to do this, we have to converse with teachers in other disciplines, talking about what the students have learned in art or drama class that might help them to explore a new concept, and finding out how they are handling conceptual development through multiple systems in science or math.

Like Lemke, we believe that students should realise that they make meaning with many semiotic resources such as language, image, quantity, relationship, gesture and action. Like Street, we believe that these resources are drawn from cultural systems of meaning laced with messages about gender, class, race and power. We are trying to be more conscious of these embedded messages ourselves, so that students see demonstrations of critical thinking where we critique the layout of a text, the choice of visual images, the tone of voice or other cues with encoded meanings. As Lemke explains, we are trying to 'pay attention to what was formerly taken for granted', to educate our students and ourselves about the multiple systems of meaning involved in literacy.

Conclusion

It is important that we recognise the breakthrough this volume represents, and that we compliment the many persons involved who made it happen. It is our hope that this study and our work leads to sweeping educational reform in post-compulsory education in Australia. This is not a job for tinkers. It involves reform of basic educational policy. We're convinced that we can't change classrooms without changing schools, and we can't change schools without changing the superstructures within which those schools are embedded. Classrooms and schools that attempt to operate on a new vision of literacy, learning and education become compromised out of existence over time, subtly and not-so-subtly, through constant and consistent pressure to conform to the more dominant systems of policy that are in place. True reform has to change these basic policies on language, learning and education. This volume is one piece of the pie.

As the editors make clear in the following chapter, the second piece of the pie involves acknowledging educators and the fact that they have significant contributions to make. We join with Cumming and Wyatt-Smith in arguing that researchers and educational administrators need to work in conversation with teachers, students and parents, if they are going to get beyond offering fragmented bits of advice to schools. This means that educators need to be supported in terms of professional development, in regard to their undertaking their own inquiries, and in the creation of new public policy on language, learning and education. It is only in the collective that meaningful and much-needed educational reform of the type called for in this study will happen.

Endnote

Members of the Indiana Study Group who participated in the preparation of this report include Dr Beth Berghoff (Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis (IUPUI)), Dr Cynthia Brabson (Indiana University, Bloomington [IUB]), Dr Patricia Teft Cousin (IUPUI), Dr Jerome Harste (IUB), Dr Christine Leland (IUPUI) and Dr Mitzi Lewison (IUB). As a study group, we are devoted to supporting each other’s writing and research efforts, as well as to taking on group projects that support these goals. One of the unique things about our study group is that each of us is currently involved in both teacher education and school reform. Prior to coming together, each of us had reformed our own teaching and had worked with individual teachers in reforming their teaching and their classrooms. During the past five years, each of us has extended this work by attempting to work with groups of local teachers to affect systematic change in individual schools, individual institutions and entire school districts. Because we are a thought collective, each of us is going to list ourself as first author on our résumé when citing this paper. Readers should cite the Indiana Study Group as the author of this paper, but feel free to footnote the authorship in an order of their choice.