
Why almost everyone is wrong about the curriculum

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Back-to-basics is not the right response.

There is no doubt that the [Australian Curriculum](#) contains a great deal of nonsense. Much of this involves profligacy in wording. Consider, for example, the ‘science as a human endeavour’ strand of the science curriculum – representing a third of that curriculum’s content. In Year 7, students learn that ‘science knowledge can develop through collaboration across the disciplines of science and the contributions of people from a range of cultures,’ which is warm and multicultural, but what do we need to actually teach students? If we look to the elaborations, it suggests “considering how water use and management rely on knowledge from different areas of science, and involves the application of technology”. What areas of science? What applications of technology? For that matter, what examples of water use? Are we talking about the Murray–Darling basin plan here or how domestic gardeners use bore water? It’s not clear, and this is supposed to be the part of the document that makes it clear.

You could strip out this strand and its associated verbiage entirely, and the curriculum would be no worse for it.

Some of these elaborations relate to the way teachers are supposed to shoehorn various forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge into the curriculum, and this tends to be the focus of criticism from the centre-right press. For example, [in a piece by Natasha Bitá for *The Australian*](#) earlier this year we read:

Basket weaving seems like a woke way to teach maths, yet the national school curriculum incorporates Indigenous dance, storytelling and basket weaving into mathematics lessons. In a contorted attempt to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history and culture into every subject area – along with the themes of sustainability and Australia’s connection with Asia – the curriculum has dumbed down a generation of children with a failed experiment in social engineering.

Bitá speaks to the big boss of cognitive load theory, John Sweller:

Sweller has no doubt the curriculum was written with ‘good intentions’ but he is critical of the ‘bizarre’ Indigenous elaborations for maths. ‘Adding unnecessary information to any curriculum imposes an extraneous cognitive load that interferes with learning,’ he says.

Sweller is right, but this is not to disrespect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture; it is to acknowledge that squeezing it into a tenuously related mathematics lesson is counterproductive to teaching students maths. It is also tokenistic and patronising. First Nations cultures – plural – should be a distinct area of study and not something tagged onto mathematics alongside a load of other afterthoughts.

The core academic curriculum should be built around English, maths, science and history – the four distinct academic perspectives on truth.

[A companion piece by Bitá](#), which again gives Sweller welcome airtime, rehearses arguments for a ‘slimmed-down’ and ‘back-to-basics’ curriculum in response. It references the New South Wales Curriculum as its model. Confusingly for those outside Australia, some states have their own curriculums which are *intended* to be compliant with the overall Australian Curriculum, but as this example shows, often have different priorities.

Alan Finkel, the former Australian Chief Scientist, is quoted in both articles to the effect that the primary school curriculum should focus on English, maths, sport and music. Idiosyncrasies aside, these are, apparently, ‘muscle memory’ subjects that need to be started early. Commendably, Finkel at least makes the case for mastering times tables. However, if the mention of ‘back-to-basics’ made me shudder, this curriculum suggestion for primary education makes me press the button and get off the bus at the next available stop.

I find it odd that these kinds of arguments appear in the press adjacent to arguments for a knowledge-rich curriculum, with no comment on the dissonance. The same newspaper that published a call for back-to-basics [has also platformed Ben Jensen making the case for knowledge](#). As an aside, I believe Aussie newspapers should really platform

me, but my long history of investing time in writing opinion articles for *The Australian* that don’t get published is a sore point.

Yes, primary school kids should play sport, and they should have the opportunity to study music – even if there is a longer discussion to be had about individual instrumental tuition and the role of music appreciation over performance. However, these are not the biggest academic levers for future success.

Instead, the core academic curriculum should be built around English, maths, science and history – the four distinct academic perspectives on truth. Paradoxically, focusing only on English and ignoring subjects such as science and history is ultimately detrimental to students’ understanding of ... *English*. That is essentially Jensen’s case, but it’s worth repeating.

[To understand what we read requires us to build a ‘situation model’ of what is being written about.](#) Understanding a text is a little like getting a joke. Imagine I told you this gag:

*A horse walks into a bar.
The barman asks,
‘Why the long face?’*

In order to understand it, you would need to understand something about bars, barmen and why a barman would talk to someone entering a bar. You would need to be able to picture the scene. You would have to understand the idiom that having a ‘long face’ means someone looks sad. Finally, you would have to be able to picture a horse and the fact the horse, quite literally, has a long face.

None of this is spelled out in the joke. If it were, it wouldn’t be funny. However, most writing is similar. It implicitly assumes knowledge on the part of the reader and therefore does not intricately detail and explain every point. This knowledge is drawn from a wide array of learning, including domains such as science and history, but it does not have to be particularly deep. In this sense, knowledge that is ‘a mile wide and an inch deep’ is extremely useful, and yet it is just such knowledge that is criticised by Pat Murphy, president of the Australian Government Primary Principals Association, [in one of Bitá’s two articles](#).

However, I would go even further. Knowledge is what we think *with*. Once established in long-term memory,

we can draw down on highly intricate webs of connected knowledge in an instant and apply them to whatever we are confronted with. If I say that “Jane is a disinterested party”, then for those who know what ‘disinterested’ means – i.e. not the same thing as ‘uninterested’ – I have quickly communicated quite a large amount of information. Complex constructs – vocabulary words, algebraic moves, narratives – effortlessly integrate themselves into the very substance of thought. English, or its mundane, functional derivative, literacy, do not exist as separate from this knowledge.

So, subjects like science and history are critical. From an early age, children can learn them orally, even if they cannot yet read. Little children enjoy stories of grand pharaohs in ancient Egypt. They don’t need to be able to write essays about them. However, the current Australian Curriculum for science and history is deeply unambitious. Strip out the padding and redundant elaborations, and what remains is thin gruel.

History also needs something of a rethink. Currently, Australian history teaching is distinctly uninterested in the ancient world. This is probably related to its focus on *bad things the British did*, a focus maintained even in those instances when it was Australians who did those bad things against the express orders of colonial officials.

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History is seen not only as a series of moral lessons – a postmodern testament – but also as a way of somehow fixing the perceived wrongs of the past by supposedly telling a new and improved version of the truth.

This is not an argument for teaching the philosophy of history to young people. Nothing could be duller than a course about inductive logic, the uncertainty of truth, and history as a method for trying to apprehend it. The source analysis approach to history teaching has been tried and found wanting. However, just as with science, we should be teaching the subject in a way that is at least congruent with its nature as a discipline.

Perhaps ironically, it is the deeper nature of these disciplines that the ‘science as a human endeavour’ and ‘historical skills’ strands of the Australian Curriculum are an attempt to address. Instead, they clearly illustrate that nothing of the sort can be achieved in the absence of rigorous and detailed subject knowledge.

We don’t need to go ‘back-to-basics’. We don’t need a primary curriculum all about times tables and spelling with none of the colour of the liberal arts or natural sciences. That is an opportunity missed. We need a curriculum that is full of substance, some of which students may grapple with deeply and some they will merely acquaint themselves with until the day it becomes key to unlocking a text.

This is how we make the curriculum meaningful. This is how we make it interesting. A knowledge-rich curriculum is anything but basic.

This article originally appeared on the author’s blog, [Filling the Pail](#).

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