

A fair go for world affairs: A critical inquiry into the teaching of International Humanitarian Law in an initial teacher education program

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Abstract

With the implementation of the Australian Curriculum, the learning area of Society and Environment has been greatly impacted. What has been considered a multidisciplinary learning area is now known as Humanities and Social Sciences with prescribed content, teaching and learning approaches and achievement standards. This paper describes an investigation into the development of pre-service teachers' pedagogical interests in society and environment as they transition into more disciplinary ways of knowing. An issues-based approach has been used to explore and develop pre-service teachers' pedagogical interests and practice. The study found that a focus on contemporary issues helped to develop pre-service teachers' emancipatory interests that were further extended through a school-based inquiry. Such contemporary issues could be found in the identified themes documented in *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* (National Curriculum Board (NCB), 2009). This finding suggests that a study of contemporary issues aligning with identified themes in the Australian Curriculum History paper can achieve the emancipatory interests that were previously embedded in the society and environment curriculum learning area.

Key words: Humanities and Social Sciences, Australian Curriculum, critical inquiry, emancipatory pedagogy, initial teacher education

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The changing face of Society and Environment

The Melbourne Declaration (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2008) enshrined the goal that all young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, active and informed citizens—able to make sense of their world, think how things have become the way they are and act with moral and ethical integrity. Such has been the intent of the Society and Environment teacher; constructing socially relevant curriculum within value-specific frameworks. In the Australian Curriculum, the Society and Environment teacher must now reconceptualise the history and geography curricula to also meet those goals enshrined in the Melbourne Declaration. To better understand what can be taken forward, a brief historical perspective is provided.

In the Australian context, the historical roots of the learning area Studies of Society and Environment can be traced to the 1970s, with formal endorsement occurring in 1994 through the National Curriculum Statement (Australian Education Council, 1994). This multidisciplinary learning area, including History, Geography, Anthropology, Politics and Sociology (among others), is concerned with ‘the development of critical thinking which enables one to read the world critically and to understand the reasons and linkages behind the facts’ (Macedo, 1994, p. xvii). The Australian Curriculum endorsed the area of Humanities and Social Sciences in 2013, and the Studies of Society and Environment was recast as disciplines that include: History, Geography, Economics and Business, and Civics and Citizenship (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), 2014, pp 6/7). This disciplinary and content-driven approach has created much debate and contestation within schools, universities and associations affiliated with education. As an example, Reid (2009) argues ‘one of the features of a contemporary world is that the approach to issues, problems and challenges requires us to cross established disciplinary boundaries, not remain trapped with them. Unfortunately the document [*The Shape of the Australian Curriculum*], pays only lip-service to the issue’ (p. 9). While the content and organisation of the curriculum may have changed, Gilbert (2011) proposes there is potential for continuity in the goals and embedded pedagogies of society and environment. Gilbert contends that critical inquiry, framed by the values of democratic process, social justice, sustainability and peace, remains the key organising principle on which humanities and social sciences are based. Indeed *The Australian Curriculum Shaping Papers* for both History and Geography state that ‘students develop a critical perspective on perceived versions of the past’ (NCB, 2009, p. 5) and ‘students of geography are given practice in critically thinking about contemporary issues’ (ACARA, 2010, p. 10). The Curriculum Design Paper version 3.1 (2013) adds that ‘a curriculum for the twenty-first century will need to reflect and acknowledge the changing nature of young people as learners and the challenges and demands that will continue to shape their learning in the future. Young people will need a wide and adaptive set of skills to meet the changing expectations of society and to contribute to the creation of a more productive, sustainable and just society’ (p. 4). It is against this turbulent environment that this paper reports on an investigation into the development of pre-service teachers’ pedagogical interests and practice using critical inquiry as the approach.

Critical inquiry, a hallmark of Studies in Society and Environment curriculum, in our investigation seeks to unsettle deficit views and make explicit the influence of power and privilege. Being ‘critical’ in this case draws on the emancipatory ideal proposed by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and especially his belief that all men and women are the creators

of culture, and all have the right to 'name the world' (Freire, 1993, p. 69). On a similar theme, McInerney (2009) explains: 'For Freire, history is never pre-determined for there always exists the possibility of people acting collectively to change the world' (p. 26). Indeed as Reid, Gill and Sears (2010) have shown, the re-invention of history is relatively common as nation states seek to construct a different citizenry and world view. Freire argued that the process of change was most appropriately achieved through education. As such, our investigation maps and describes pre-service teacher's emancipatory and transformative capabilities as applied to the construction of teaching and learning curriculum in Society and Environment in middle school settings. Hoepper (2011) describes such an emancipatory approach to studying Society and Environment as one that:

... requires students to ask deep and probing questions about the phenomena they study, questioning and evaluating the assumptions embedded in those phenomena, weighing up effects (positive and negative) on the wellbeing of people and the sustainability of environments, and proposing ways of enhancing the interests of both people and environments. (p. 50)

This investigation of pre-service teachers' developing pedagogical interests using a critical inquiry approach is contextualised through the study of the 'issue': International Humanitarian Law. This issue, which is relevant to the life worlds of middle years students, provides rich possibilities for learning and has the breadth for building on interdisciplinary perspectives.

International Humanitarian Law

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) is also known as the *law of war* or the *law of armed conflict*. It is a 'set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, to limit the effects of armed conflict; it seeks to protect persons who are not or no longer participating in the hostilities and restricts the means and methods of warfare' (International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), 2004, p. 4). Exploring Humanitarian Law (EHL) is a closely affiliated educational programme that provides a humanitarian perspective on the rules of war, respecting human dignity and responding to the consequences of war. These rules:

... allow youth to measure current events against the principle of humanity rather than political and economic criteria alone, and offers evidence of a universal standard that may help them resist feelings of impotence and indifference in the face of world events. These ideas are critical to preparing the next generation to be citizens of the world. (Felt & Powell, 2005, p. 3)

The EHL curriculum requires teachers to have an understanding of the humanitarian perspective, an understanding of the rules and complexity of maintaining this perspective in war and a moral voice that will promote this perspective (Felt & Powell, 2005). EHL is taught in more than 93 countries around the world, indicating its world-wide acceptance as a worthy educational programme.

Research design

The participants in this study were twelve pre-service teachers enrolled in the course *Learning Area Specialisation: Society and Environment*. All were in their fourth and final year of a Bachelor of Education, completing their degree in the Primary/Middle program (years 3-9). A pre-requisite for this course is the successful completion of a prior Society and Environment methodology course and a minimum of two courses in Cultural and Environmental studies. Pre-service teachers undertaking this Learning Area Specialisation do so with the intention of being recruited into the teaching workforce in either a primary or secondary school setting with a specialisation in Society and Environment. Of the twelve

participants that volunteered to be part of this study, eight female and four male, all gave consent to participate in this study which was not linked to the assessment of the course. Participant names were changed to pseudonyms to provide anonymity.

The pre-service teachers completed a series of inter-related tasks that generated data about their developing pedagogical interests and practice in society and environment. First, in a focus group discussion at the beginning of the course, the pre-service teachers described their pedagogical interests and views of teaching and learning in Society and Environment. At the conclusion of the session they summarised their views in written form which were collected as data for the study. Secondly, the pre-service teachers' interests were re-visited after an induction session on IHL. The focus questions for the subsequent discussion included: *What is your understanding of IHL?* and *What capacity has this issue for being included into the Australian curriculum?* In response, the pre-service teachers created a class concept map that considered other issues related to IHL and possible inquiry directions. This document is analysed in a following section. Next, each pre-service teacher then chose one of the issues included on the concept map and constructed a unit of inquiry in the form of a webquest that would be taught in their final professional experience in schools. A webquest is a framework for learning that utilises internet resources. It is inquiry-based and encourages pre-service teachers to use higher order thinking skills to inquire into an issue or problem. Webquests are designed from the perspective of the learner and encourage collaboration through discussion and partnership with others. These are described and analysed in a following section. Finally, with the permission of the participants, data were collected from the inquiries that the pre-service teachers conducted during their final professional experience in order to shed light on their developing critical understandings and practice.

Data were analysed using Habermas' (1971) 'knowledge constitutive interests'. As a critical theorist, Habermas (1971) proposes three forms of knowledge: technical, interpretive / practical and emancipatory. Critical inquiry draws on all three knowledge interests, exposing the 'what' and 'how' (technical), the 'why' (interpretive) and 'in whose interests' (emancipatory), particularly in relation to power and disadvantage (Hoepper, 2011). Emancipatory knowledge is seen as a way of critiquing issues or situations, exposing deeply held beliefs and assumptions, and enabling a vision of a preferred future. Using these three forms of knowledge as a tool of analysis in this study, pre-service teachers' pedagogical understandings and applications of those understandings can be made more explicit.

Relevance and connectedness

Pre-service teachers' initial pedagogical interests, accessed in response to the question: 'For you, what are important aspects of teaching and learning in Society and Environment?' focussed on further developing school students' understandings of issues that connected with their life-worlds.

It's about creating awareness of environmental and social issues, making sure learning is relevant and connected between the classroom and outside life. (Amy)

McInerney (2009) states that, 'Incorporating the interests and concerns of students into the curriculum is a necessary precondition for a critical pedagogy' (p. 27), and argues that 'schools become complicit in the objectification of young people when learning is unconnected to their lives and aspirations' (p. 28). Another pre-service teacher comments:

For me, it would be teaching community values. Teaching students about the community they live in and the issues that face these communities. These issues are often marginalised in low socio-economic areas. You need to understand where you come from. (Rebecca)

While also about relevance and connectedness, this pedagogical stance is built around values and perceived disadvantage. Hoepfer (2011) argues that a critical orientation to curriculum asks students to uncover values and practices that are socially unjust or unsustainable in order to propose and take alternative actions—thus heightening awareness of social positioning.

For another pre-service teacher pedagogy is encapsulated through the following statement:

The social side of Society and Environment is important—understanding peoples and their cultures, and with that understanding and appreciation of society and its differences comes compassion. Knowledge in this area opens our eyes and helps us to look beyond ourselves. (William)

This view of pedagogy is again about connection, relating to diversity of place and student background, and it confronts youth alienation and disengagement (McInerney, 2009). Values, including appreciation and compassion, are also a central component. For these pre-service teachers, teaching and learning in Society and Environment concerns students understanding their life-worlds, the life-worlds of others, making connections between classroom learning and ‘outside life’, and gaining knowledge to be compassionate. By using Habermas’ (1971) knowledge interests, we position these data in the technical and interpretive frames—exploring *what* Society and Environment actually is, *how* it impacts on school students, and *why* teaching and learning Society and Environment is important.

Other pre-service teachers offered clearly emancipatory perspectives. These included:

The most important aspect for me is to know that my students are getting more from their learning than just knowledge, but are becoming active participants as well. They should be able to take their new knowledge and develop a new view that challenges current values and beliefs; that now or in the future might change the way they think and act. (Sarah) [participant’s emphasis]

This pre-service teacher challenges the status quo in order to take action. For her, gaining knowledge and understanding reiterates the importance of the technical and interpretive and then challenges assumed values in order to take social action, indicating a more emancipatory perspective. Another pre-service teacher explained:

It’s about allowing my students to have a voice. Like about terrorism and asking for their views, opinions and feelings. They are often overlooked within the school community and outside of the school as well. (Jarrad)

This comment recognises the importance of student voice and the lack of space for student expression, both in the school and in society. Implicit here is a critique of deficit views of student voice. McInerney (2009) refers to ‘a culture of silence’ where alienated youth come to accept the status quo and lose their transformative capacities (p. 26). Pedagogy proposed by this pre-service teacher confronts ‘the culture of silence’ and focuses on participation and

inclusion in dialogue. Having a voice also implies a sense of belonging and entitlement. Evident here are interpretive and emancipatory interests.

Pedagogy and IHL

These initial pedagogical interests of the pre-service teachers were then further developed through a critical inquiry into International Humanitarian Law. Induction into the issue of IHL was organised and conducted by staff from Australian Red Cross, and subsequent document analysis of IHL literature across a range of websites enabled the pre-service teachers to develop a technical understanding of IHL. The participants were then asked to discuss the application of IHL in the school curriculum and how their pedagogical interests might drive an inquiry into an aspect of IHL or an issue inspired by IHL. The discussion and documentation was led by the pre-service teachers. Their suggested issues for inquiry included: prisoners of war, weaponry, child soldiers, people smuggling, international aid, women in war, refugees, weapon technology, rules of engagement, terrorism and propaganda. These issues connect the classroom to the outside world, highlighting the pre-service teachers' pedagogical priorities of relevance and connectedness mentioned earlier. The issues for inquiry draw on technical and interpretive knowledge of IHL.

The pre-service teachers then suggested suitable year levels for inquiry into these issues. They made a case for IHL to be included in the Australian History Curriculum at Year 10 when study of Australia in the Modern World is mandated, with linkages to the documented themes of 'global conflict' and 'collective peace', 'rights and freedoms' and 'active citizenship' (NCB, p. 11). The pre-service teachers stated that each of their identified issues needed an historical focus to provide a deeper contextual understanding. However, they also recognised the importance of providing a geographical perspective that would give further insight to the identified issues. They determined that a single disciplinary focus would limit student understanding and present issues as being simplistic rather than expose complexities. The pre-service teachers also posed questions that might drive inquiries into each of the issues suggested. Questions included:

- How have the achievements in weapon technology affected the outcomes of war?*
- Who has access to weaponry technology?*
- How are prisoners of war treated?*
- Who are the rules of engagement for and who do they affect?*
- What social conditions create terrorism?*
- Who provides the medical services in war?*
- Why haven't nuclear weapons been banned?*
- Are all people given the same rights in war?*

While these questions have a strong technical and interpretive content for understanding the issues, they also push toward evaluating underlying assumptions embedded in the phenomena. For example, the question 'Are all people given the same rights in war?' implies there is an assumed differentiation between peoples' rights; so advantage and disadvantage are being explored. An emergent emancipatory intent is indicated here.

The pre-service teachers chose an issue inspired by IHL to build an inquiry that could form part of their teaching and learning in their final professional experience in a school setting. The inquiry was to be constructed as an electronic webquest. Issues included 'The plight of asylum seekers entering Australia', 'Children of conflict', 'Propaganda in modern times', 'Child soldiers', 'The histories of refugees', 'People smuggling' and 'Landmines'. There

appears to be a significant shift here from technical and interpretive interests toward an emancipatory interest. The issues selected are power sensitive and seek to unsettle deficit views. Each issue chosen was justified by the pre-service teachers, for example:

The plight of asylum seekers in Australia: Students will explore and investigate issues embedded in the topic that will lead them into taking action in their local community. Students will learn to be aware of whose voice is being heard and how their own thoughts are influenced by the media and government. This inquiry is about social justice and democratic rights (Laura).

Values that underpin this inquiry were identified and social action is one of the goals of the inquiry. Hoeppe (2011) argues that an emancipatory interest enables critique of a situation for social action, and values become a central part of any such inquiry. Another pre-service teacher, whose chosen issue was *Propaganda in modern times*, stated:

Students will investigate and analyse issues arising from propaganda relating to stereotyping and racially driven material, in particular Muslim peoples, and propose and participate in alternative media practices that promote social justice and inclusion (William).

Again, this inquiry is based on valuing social justice and inclusion and purposefully targets the power of the media and its effect on consumers. By proposing and participating in alternative media practices, the school students are prompted towards social action.

This pre-service teacher described her webquest into the plight of *Child Soldiers* as follows:

This unit explores the concerns for the welfare, rights and freedom of children in armed conflict. Students will investigate the plight of child soldiers, the effects war has on these children and what we as an enlightened community are doing to help these people. This will see students taking their own social action (Nadine).

While a technical and interpretive focus is included in this unit of work, emancipatory knowledge comes to the fore in questioning what ‘we, as an enlightened community are doing’. This emancipatory interest seeks to expose the cruel and destructive practices of those involved in child soldiering and gain support for strategies that will stop such practices. This pre-service teacher is aiming to shine a light on practices that are inherently inhumane and in so doing take action against such injustices. Building emancipatory capabilities would seem to be at the heart of the pre-service teacher’s work described above. Interestingly, all of the webquests described above were inherently inter-disciplinary. Certainly an historical focus required the support of geographical and sociological understandings.

There has been a marked shift here in knowledge interests of pre-service teachers. Their inquiries clearly have emancipatory intent indicated by the commitment to justice, recognition of the influence of power, disadvantage and privilege, and commitment to social action. These socially critical inquirers are demonstrating that they ‘are interested in questioning the dominant assumptions in modern industrialized societies, rejecting earlier constructions of meaning and value structures, and embarking on a quest for new meaning and practices’ (Kincheloe, 2001, p. 126).

Pedagogical applications in school settings

The participants in this study had a further opportunity to consolidate their critical pedagogical practice in their final professional experience course. They were placed in middle school settings and constructed and conducted a school-based inquiry of teaching and

learning practices in Society and Environment. This enabled the pre-service teachers to reflect upon themselves as beginning Society and Environment educators and, through an inquiry focussing broadly on the learning area, to work with students and more experienced teachers in the field.

One such inquiry was entitled *If students know what to ask who knows what they might find out?* The question driving this inquiry was: ‘What are effective teaching strategies that enable students to ask deep questions and seek out their own answers when it comes to Society and Environment?’. This inquiry is strongly underpinned by an emancipatory knowledge interest. It provides opportunities for students to ask questions that are not immediately obvious and to find ways to answer those questions from a range of sources. A challenge is contained in the pre-service teacher’s provocative title.

Another pre-service teacher’s inquiry was entitled *Social action in schools: What does it look like?* This inquiry sought to find out ‘What have been the most successful ways teachers have inspired students to take social action in their local and wider communities?’. Again, driven by an emancipatory interest where student social action is assumed, this inquiry sought to find out how teachers have *inspired* students. Implicit in this question is student engagement, student participation and student voice, all of which are essential to emancipatory interests. A further inquiry entitled *Are we a multicultural Australia?* asked the question: ‘What are effective strategies that enable students living in mono-cultural areas to value the Australian multicultural society?’. This pre-service teacher saw multiculturalism as being synonymous with the learning area and an integral feature of Australian society. He sought ways of teaching about multiculturalism in communities that are largely mono-cultural. His intent to question the status quo and introduce new understandings about our broader societal context is made explicit.

Student voice, generated from within their own communities is essential to the development of positive school student identities. Voices within some communities however remain silent. Such communities have been marginalised from the mainstream in terms of socio-economic status and complex social issues often related to poverty. One pre-service teacher who requested a placement in a socially disadvantaged area of Adelaide’s fringe constructed an inquiry entitled *A fair go for world affairs: An inquiry into the teaching of real world issues in Society and Environment in a secondary school in the northern suburbs of Adelaide*. This inquiry sought to find out ‘how educators can effectively teach issues arising from students’ life-worlds within a Society and Environment curriculum’. Here we see real world issues arising from students’ life-worlds and their communities. This inquiry acknowledges the importance of students’ understanding of the nature of their communities; how power is enacted and how their social structures and conditions differ from those of other students in other communities. On this theme, Kincheloe (2001) argues that ‘at the very core of a critical democratic social studies rests the emancipatory/empowering concern with helping marginalized students use social knowledge to help escape poverty’ (p. 131). A place to begin is to study students’ own community social knowledge.

These school-based inquiries present strong emancipatory interests. They challenge deficit views and invite explorations of power relations and how privilege works. These inquiries ‘trample the boundaries’ (Kellner, 1989, p. 22) of disciplinary frameworks. The inquiries are driven by issues which cannot be adequately investigated through the lens of a single discipline. The pre-service teachers recognised the centrality of multiple disciplines within their inquiries and used their interconnectedness to uncover new understandings about their

inquiries. The inquiries themselves make evident the application of critical pedagogical practices developed in the Learning Area Specialisation course and in the pre-service teacher's final professional experience in a middle schooling setting.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that a study of contemporary issues, in this case IHL, has the capacity to inspire the development of pre-service teachers' critical pedagogical interests and practice. Such an approach is relevant today, but is somewhat challenged within the prescribed disciplinary confines of the History and Geography Australian Curricula. Reid (2012) proposes:

Education has perhaps never been more complex. Educators are being asked to devise and teach curricula—for an increasingly diverse student population—that is relevant to the changing conditions of a globalising world, including new economies, new forms of citizenship, and new forms of communication. (p.1)

In order to construct and teach such curricula, Reid (2012, p. 1) argues that 'educators must have the understandings, skills and dispositions to be open to change, creative, flexible, collaborative and critical'. Our study has highlighted the development of these capabilities in pre-service teachers when inspired by a contemporary issue, supported in their pedagogical development and provided with the opportunity to translate their understandings in their final professional experience.

With the identified links in this study between IHL and the Year 10 Australian Curriculum History focus of *Australia and the Modern World*, Gilbert's (2011) view that there is potential for continuity in the values and embedded pedagogies of Society and Environment within the Australian Curriculum: History would seem to be supported. However, pre-service teachers need the opportunity to develop their pedagogical interests (technical, interpretive and emancipatory) and find a way into the curriculum that acknowledges the life-worlds of students. The study of contemporary issues provides a way for this to occur. Such contemporary issues, often multi-disciplinary in nature, need also to align thematically with the suggested framework of the Australian Curriculum History. Here, a re-interpretation of the content has been made in order to retain the values and pedagogies of Society and Environment.

There has never been a greater need for teachers to connect and engage their students in taking an active role in shaping their present and future worlds. Such engagement needs to be informed by understandings from history, geography, sociology and politics. For this end to be achieved, teaching needs to be conceptualised as an intellectual, political and transformative process (Freire, 1998).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the contributions of Petra Ball (Australian Red Cross, South Australia) who worked with us on this project, Heath McCallum (Australian Red Cross, Australian Capital Territory) who provided in-service on IHL and academic colleagues who offered invaluable advice about the construction of this paper.

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