
Book Review

Smith D & Lovat T (2003) *Curriculum: Action on Reflection* (4th edition). Sydney NSW: Social Science Press. ISBN 1 876633573.

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Curriculum: Action on Reflection is becoming one of the iconic texts of Australian education. The fact that it is into its fourth edition suggests that it has met and continues to meet the needs of a particular market. Clearly preservice teacher education is its mainstay, and in my view the scope and quality of the text will ensure that teacher educators will continue to recommend it as a key resource for their students.

However it should not be seen solely as a text for student teachers. It is also required reading for practising educators and policymakers. We are at an important time in Australian educational history: a liminal moment, poised at the threshold of significant change and yet working within traditional structures and processes. This blurring of old and new presents some fundamental challenges. Some seek refuge in calls for a return to the certainties of modernist times, others embrace the fluidity and diversity of a world compressed in time and space. These dilemmas for educators are sharply focused in the area of curriculum where calls for 'new learning' (e.g., ACDE, 2000) jostle uneasily with demands for a more rigorous focus on the established disciplines and the old basics. In such an environment, a deep appreciation of the theoretical and practical aspects of curriculum is needed to avoid superficial responses to the emerging challenges. I would be happy to recommend this book as a basis for informing the sort of on going curriculum discussion and debate that should be the lifeblood of any educational institution in this changing environment.

The book manages to balance the complexities of being an introduction to curriculum for student teachers, whilst also being a resource for experienced teachers to draw upon as they think about their curriculum work. Its scope is comprehensive, canvassing all the key aspects of curriculum including the origins and nature of curriculum, curriculum planning, decision making and change, the relationship between the curriculum and foundational disciplines, the poststructuralist challenge to dominant versions of the curriculum, assessment,

pedagogy and so on. Of course there are a number of texts that cover the same territory. So what is different about *Curriculum: Action on Reflection*?

A feature of the book is that its two authors, both leading Australian curriculum scholars, build and sustain an argument for their preferred view of curriculum. In particular, they work within the Habermasian critical theory tradition, understanding curriculum as action on reflection and using this understanding as the reference point for the text. Thus, rather than aspects of curriculum such as assessment and pedagogy being free floating, the text introduces them in the context of the argument. In so doing the text models the point that curriculum is not an ideology-free process. And the approach is sustained throughout the book without marginalizing competing views.

Other strengths of the book are that it is very readable, and that this edition has been genuinely updated with the addition of recent references, a chapter about curriculum futures, and the use of a number of contemporary national curriculum developments as examples to illustrate points. In addition, there is a range of thought provoking activities suggested at the end of each of the chapters many of which seek to engage readers in questioning taken-for-granted assumptions. Indeed, whilst these activities are written for student teachers, many of them would usefully form the basis of ongoing professional development for teachers, and would be salutary exercises for curriculum policy makers.

At the same time, in my view there are some gaps. First, it is a pity that the book does not provide some sort of historical sweep of Australian curriculum. Of course, a curriculum history of Australian education has yet to be written and it is certainly not the task of this book. But a chapter, perhaps later in the book, that uses as its lens many of the terms/concepts/views that are introduced throughout the book, would help to offer a sense of the ongoing work of Australian educators and the debates that sustain that work. As it stands, the many historical references in the book are usually to the work of overseas curriculum theorists (Tyler, Taba, Wheeler, Hirst and Peters, Stenhouse etc.) with only passing reference to the ways in which their ideas and models were taken up in Australia.

Second, I was surprised that given the extended and useful discussion in the book about forms and ways of knowing, that there was no similar discussion about developments such as multiple intelligences (e.g., Gardner, 1999) and the implications of these for curriculum practice. Third, the book does not refer to a number of the contemporary debates in the curriculum literature. For example, the recent debates between Wraga (e.g., 1999, 2002) and the reconceptualist school (e.g., Pinar, 1999) about the practical purposes of curriculum scholarship, not only highlight a number of the continuities and discontinuities of the curriculum field but also demonstrate the liveliness of curriculum discourse.

Finally, in my view the connection between curriculum and democracy is undeveloped. In championing the teacher as reflective practitioner, the book establishes an implicit binary between the curriculum work of teachers and the official curriculum of educational systems. While the official curriculum throughout

the 20th century served to control and constrain the work of teachers, it does not follow that it need always do so. The official curriculum can be an important element in underscoring the publicness of education, connecting across schools and communities and providing a bulwark against the competitive individualism of the stand-alone, self-managing school. Key questions for educators in the contemporary environment are: Is there a role for official curriculum in a globalizing world? Can an official curriculum be structured that is not top down? How can we attain some sense of curriculum commonality while retaining flexibility to meet the needs of local contexts? These questions go beyond the individual teacher and touch upon fundamental questions about the relationship between education and democracy.

But these are comparatively minor quibbles. *Curriculum: Action on Reflection* is an important book. It has informed the curriculum work of thousands of Australian educators over the past decade, and with this 4th edition, will continue to make a major contribution to the complicated curriculum conversation in Australia for many years to come. Given the importance of the curriculum decisions that will be made in the next few years, one can only hope that the decision makers will be guided by the strength and clarity of its analysis.

References

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