

For students of the national curriculum, history never repeats

How the new History curriculum is being developed

"One faces the future with one's past," asserts winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Pearl S Buck. This succinct phrase sums up why many feel that it's time for history as a subject to step out from the umbrella of Studies of Society and Environment (SOSE) or of inquiry learning and stand on its own two feet.

The role that history currently plays in Australian schools varies wildly from state to state. New South Wales is the only state in which the study of history is compulsory to Year 10, and consequently in most states and territories the number of students continuing with the subject in Years 11 and 12 is minimal. At primary level, history is allocated little time because literacy and numeracy are the priorities. When history is taught in the lower years, it is usually not presented as an explicit discipline, but is covered almost incidentally as part of an investigation of a broader topic.

Yet history was chosen as one of the four disciplines to be included in the first stage of the new national curriculum. For many educators, especially in the primary sector, this rang alarm bells – the "crowded curriculum" is a very real concern and mandating the teaching of history as a discrete subject would only increase pressure on teachers. The case for the inclusion of history is, however, quite compelling.

One proponent of history as a separate discipline is Prof Stuart Macintyre, Ernest Scott Professor of History at the University of Melbourne. Invited by Barry McGaw, Chair of the National Curriculum Board (NCB), to draft a Framing Paper for the history component of the national curriculum, Prof Macintyre has been heavily involved in the direction that the subject has taken. According to Prof Macintyre, the inclusion of history as one of the first four subjects in a unified Australian curriculum presented its own opportunities and challenges: "My hope was that a national curriculum would allow a clear and sustained sequence of study for all students up to Year 10, and a greater proportion in Years 11 and 12."

The process used to draft the Framing Paper was robust, to say the least. Prof Macintyre prepared a preliminary draft, which was then discussed with an advisory group comprising teachers, teacher educators, university historians and the director of the Powerhouse Museum. With such diverse backgrounds, the group elaborated and refined



the draft, which was then taken to a larger forum for feedback. This information was collated by a group of senior members of the History Teachers Association (HTA).

After recruiting the assistance of Tony Taylor from the Education Faculty at Monash University, Prof Macintyre, with constant reference to the advisory group and the HTA, completed a final revision of the document. But the consultation did not end there. The NCB then put the Framing Paper out for public consultation.

The Australian Primary Principals Association (APPA) encapsulated the concerns of many primary teachers in their response to the document. The APPA declared, "The expectation... that history as described in the paper would comprise 'at least ten per cent' of teaching time in primary schools is explicitly and strongly rejected." It went on to suggest that the unique nature of teaching at primary level was not adequately reflected in the Framing

Paper, which seemed, "less relevant to primary than to secondary schools."

The NCB appears to have heeded the feedback. The Framing Paper was revised and eventually became a document entitled *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History*. Gone were the time percentage requirements that were so problematic for primary schools. They have been replaced with notional time allocations of half an hour per week in the K to 2 area and one hour per week in Years 3–6.

The Curriculum Design Paper, a brief given to writers of the curriculum, is quite unambiguous about the significance that should be attached to these allocations, stating that they are "...a design assumption about relative emphasis given to subjects and [are] intended to guide writers on the teaching/learning time that they can assume as they write the curriculum... schools and school authorities will be able to take more or less time than the design time... when implementing the curriculum."

Attempts have also been made to address concerns about the appropriateness and manageability of content in Stage 1 (K-2) and more specifically Stage 2 (Years 3-6). The curriculum focus for Stage 2 centres on four key historical skills and four focus questions designed to help students “develop an appreciation of the legacy of the past.” It is easy to see how these could be linked to inquiry learning. For example, the focus question “How has the past influenced the present?” clearly cuts across other disciplines including science and technology, English, and civics and citizenship. As Prof Macintyre suggests, “The enthusiasm for inquiry-based and student-centred learning was meant to integrate disciplines, not abolish them.”

Since the Framing Paper was finalised, work has begun on the business of actually writing the history curriculum. *Aims and Rationale*, a sequence of knowledge, understanding and skills, and a content outline were prepared by a team of 10 writers, and put out for consultation and workshopping. The detailed curriculum documents were scheduled for completion for the K-10 year levels by the end of 2009.

Prof Macintyre’s input into the Framing Document has been considerable, and has led to the adoption of a world history perspective in the curriculum. He holds a belief that, “we will understand Australian history better if we appreciate the long history of other places and other peoples.” The world focus received general support in feedback submitted to the NCB, with one respondent suggesting that: “Placing Australia within the world is a key to understanding Australian history. Perhaps the lack of this placement has contributed to students seeing Australian history as boring.”

In primary schools, the world view sits comfortably with inquiry learning which encourages students to look outwards from knowledge of themselves, to local, regional, national and global understandings. It might also go some way towards addressing concerns expressed in the APPA’s feedback that the curriculum should avoid unnecessary repetition of content, offering new perspectives on key events. A major positive regarding the history

curriculum in the eyes of Prof Macintyre is the opportunity to establish the systematic teaching of the discipline. An impressive 92 per cent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the proposed structure of the subject, with many expressing hope that it will provide distinct areas of study for each stage of schooling.

The decision to include a futures orientation in the History curriculum received similar support, with 86 per cent of those providing feedback agreeing with the proposal. Prof Macintyre sees this as an important justification for the importance being given to history as a separate discipline. “The orientation of the present national curriculum – equipping young Australians for a

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future marked by globalisation, rapid technological change, social and cultural diversity, the challenge of sustainability and the growing importance of our position in the Asia-Pacific region – makes an informed historical understanding all the more important,” he explains.

The formulation of the Framing Paper and the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: History* documents has not been without its worries. According to Prof Macintyre, “It is commonly assumed that anyone can take a history class,” and the lack of appropriately trained teachers may therefore be a major stumbling block when it comes to implementing the new history curriculum. He asserts that, “If the subject is to be taken up and taught systematically and sequentially, there are serious implications for both in-service and pre-service preparation of teachers. There are few signs that these implications are appreciated.”

In its feedback to the NCB, the APPA was also concerned about “the assumption that there will be teachers with substantial history training in primary schools,” indicating that this is not

currently the case. Without adequate professional development to equip practising primary teachers to confidently implement the history curriculum, and without appropriate funding and policies to attract history graduates into teaching, the planning, teaching and assessment of history is likely to fall short of expectations.

Despite this, Prof Macintyre, and those who worked with him on the Framing Paper, chose to aim for the best outcomes possible when deciding on the direction of the document. “For good reasons, the development of the national curriculum started from first principles,” he explains. Macintyre felt that it was important not to graft the curriculum onto existing documents, but to start from scratch, with clear aims about what it would achieve for teachers and students alike. Considerations included the diverse backgrounds of Australian students, the knowledge, understanding, skills and values that would be embedded in the curriculum, and its accessibility to teachers.

With the direction of the new curriculum largely settled, attention will now turn to the implementation stage. The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA), which replaced the NCB during 2009, is seeking input on the draft curriculum documents from late February to May 2010. The documents will be available for viewing online, and stakeholders from across the country will be able to give feedback via consultation forums, online surveys and trialling of the draft materials in schools.

A finalised digital version will be available in August 2010, and the first schools will pilot the new curriculum during 2011.

The pilot phase offers a chance to ensure that as much thought is put into implementation of the curriculum as was given to its development. As Prof Macintyre observed, “The challenge for history in the national curriculum, in short, is that a national curriculum is being prepared with a frustrating paucity of information about how it is to be implemented and sustained.” And it is on the success of the implementation that the government’s educational reforms will be judged by history.

Stuart Macintyre



Prof Stuart Macintyre is a renowned historian whose chief research interests are in Australian history. Educated in Melbourne, he completed his doctoral studies at Cambridge and in addition to being the Ernest Scott Professor of History is also a Laureate Professor at Melbourne University.

He was the president of the Australian Historical Association from 1996-1998, chaired the

Humanities and Creative Arts Panel of the Australian Research Council from 2002-2004, and has served terms on councils of the National Library of Australia and the State Library of Victoria. He is also a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and currently the President of the Academy of the Social Sciences.

Prof Macintyre caught the history bug from his Year 5 and 6 teacher, a Mr Hamilton, who had worked in a variety of country towns and was knowledgeable in their history. “He brought them alive for us, evoking

the way they had developed, the rural industries they practised, their way of life,” he recalls. In secondary school, David Webster, another teacher, opened up to Prof Macintyre the study of the past as an exercise of discovery, which led to him majoring in history at university.

Stuart Macintyre is an avid reader of many histories including ancient and modern, European, Asian and American. He is more than ever convinced that history affords an understanding of change and continuity, causation and contingency, that enriches learning.