

The new national history curriculum: We can't change history...can we?

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Abstract

The revision of history is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, there are strong arguments for revisiting interpretations of the past that may be subject to change in response to new evidence or perspectives. The revision of history has often been linked to nationalism and ideas of historical and cultural identity. Similarly, the new national history curriculum, especially in regards to two of its key cross-curriculum dimensions: 'Indigenous¹ perspectives' and 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia²', draws a strong parallel with the transformation of the Australian national identity from 'monoculture' to 'multi-culture'.

This paper critically explores the sustainability of the curriculum in light of the knowledge needed to teach it. The inclusion of Indigenous Perspectives and Asia literacy has made the two key areas seemingly strange bedfellows. The two share similar concerns regarding the problematising of cultural politics, challenging Eurocentric curriculum and the complexities of cross-cultural understanding, yet compete for space as discrete bodies of knowledge. Furthermore, the sustainability of both Asia literacy (NALSAS, 2001) and Indigenous perspectives initiatives are questioned due to slow progress and outcomes plateaus (Gray, 2008).

There are also substantial absences in dialogue regarding critical evaluation of how the 'new history' will be catered for in teacher education. This paper discusses the construction of knowledge in the national history curriculum and challenges for teacher-education programs to prepare graduates to realise curriculum requirements.

Keywords: History, Asia, Indigenous, curriculum

Introduction

This paper outlines the development of history curricula, in particular changes regarding grand narratives. This is followed by an exploration of the national history secondary curriculum³ which proposes a move from grand narratives to a multi narrative with the inclusion of representations of Asia literacy and Indigenous perspectives as part of cross-curriculum dimensions. The paper closes with questions regarding what changes to the history curriculum mean for teacher education. The sustainability of the knowledge required to engage meaningfully with representations of Asia literacy and Indigenous perspectives is a key concern in history teacher education and there is one issue on which both the curriculum advisory board and professional teaching bodies agree: teacher education is imperative to successful implementation (Kiem, 2010a; Macintyre 2010).

Changing history

The national curriculum is not the first revision of history curricula. The late 20th century saw a critical shift from a conservative perspective of curriculum based around a canon to a constructivist approach. “Old History” – a term coined to describe longstanding practices in both primary and secondary schools in Britain, Australia and other former colonies (Hoepper, 2004, p. 13), was manifest in the academic study of history in schools relying on “reproduction of accepted and unquestioned grand narratives or stories about the past to maintain social control” (Harris & Bateman, 2007, p. 199). Amid a backdrop of social change, there were dramatic changes in schools in the 1970s to assert a “New History” (Hoepper, 2004). New History emphasised the use of inquiry, questioning ‘true’ history rather than accepting national unitary narrative content.

Hoepper (2004) recommends that “the emphasis on inquiry has been the most important development in the teaching and learning of history in Australian schools since the 1970s” (p. 14), however counters this with the acknowledgement that the use of the inquiry process in schools required further development. An impeding aspect of the ‘New’ was that students were still applying aspects of the ‘Old’. An enduring legacy was that although used more prolifically in classrooms, sources were still considered to be accurate and reliable. Hoepper (2004) cites a greater breakthrough in the 1980s with a focus on evaluating sources of evidence, emphasising critical thinking and literacies as key practices to questioning historical sources, and the versions of history that they support.

Michael Young’s (2008) critique of constructivism notes that the impetus here should include asking “what kinds of knowledge should be the basis of the curriculum” (p. 10). Moving away from grand narratives towards critical thinking has combined with a shift in focus of educational interests, most notably towards “global interconnectedness across all key domains of human activity and breaking down the significance of borders” (Eckersley, 2007, p. 10). Vick and Halbert (2008) highlight spatial movement in Australian history curricula, from an Anglo-centred approach to an Australian centered approach to global and regional history. Keystone documents such as the *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians* (2008) support Eckersley’s and Vick and Halbert’s claim with themes of global integration, international mobility, globalisation and emerging technologies. In Australian educational discourse, these themes are foregrounded as the “kinds of knowledge” (Young, 2008, p. 10) that should form the basis of curricula.

While this pedagogical revision of history arguably extends students’ capabilities in a globalised environment, it also potentially limits nationalistic sentiment, in contrast to the dominant celebratory ideologies of Old History. This presents tensions between global perspectives and national priorities. The national identity is no longer the priority for globalised critical thinking students. Harris and Bateman (2007) point out that “at an international and national level governments have responded to this problem by mandating conservative changes to the history curriculum,” (p. 199) citing moves to introduce national history standards in the United States (US), United Kingdom and Europe as examples of attempts to preserve nationalistic myths. Michael Apple (2001)

notes discourses of national identity constructed by neoconservative goals for a US national curriculum. Driven in part by a sense of loss in imagined communities, these goals have been somewhat compromised to support the creation of curricula that partially recognizes, but never fully embraces “contributions of the Other” (Apple, 2001, pp. 49-50). An immigrant history discourse frames the history national curriculum; regarding everyone in the history of the US as immigrants. Apple suggests that what this discourse glosses over is that not all immigrants came freely and/or were regarded as having equal freedoms (p. 50). History curriculum is often seen by governments as a cultural mechanism to assert imaginings of history, and on a national scale this myth of shared history becomes a binding nexus: a site for preserving national identities and perpetuating national grand narratives (Harris & Bateman 2007; Doherty 2008).

In Australia, discourses of national identity and grand narratives are evident in the history debate. Although pedagogical concerns relating to the inquiry process are noted, it is content concerns that dominated dialogue. Julie Bishop (then Minister for Education, Science and Training) called for “a body of historical knowledge which should be taught to all Australian students... the essential narrative” (2006). Bishop was supported by her successor Julia Gillard, who stated “that she was ‘an educational traditionalist’, backing a ‘traditional interpretation of the nation’s history, that is, that Australia was ‘settled’ rather than ‘invaded’” (‘Gillard wants history taken back to basics’, *The Australian*, 3 December 2007, in Doherty, 2008, p. 9). Whether recent efforts have been, as Doherty (2008) suggests, to “renationalise the social imaginary... [or] a nostalgic reaction to the erosion of past certainties produced by cultural globalization,” (p. 9) they do warrant close attention as the history curriculum is now set to evolve again in Australia.

‘Australian History’

The Draft Consultation version 1.0 (ACARA, 2010) notes that “historical narrative should be used so that students experience the story in the history” (p. 4). Indigenous perspectives and Asia literacy introduce problematic elements to historical narratives. Rizvi (1997) and Broinowski (1992) state that static and singular notions of Asia and Asian culture are inadequate; such are the diverse geographical, cultural and political aspects they encompass. The complexity of the term ‘Asia’ is mirrored by that of ‘Indigenous’ in Australia – wherein there are two distinct groups; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and then further distinct groupings within these groups, which, as for the term ‘Asian’, are often conflated and abstracted into a pan Indigenous identity . Practices of abstraction have curricular implications if not approached with critical reflexivity and a solid knowledge base. Thus, *The Melbourne Declaration* mandates that “Australians need to become ‘Asia literate’” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 4) and “be able to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia” (p. 9). Similarly, in regards to Indigenous perspectives the *Melbourne Declaration* asserts:

Active and informed citizens understand and acknowledge the value of Indigenous cultures and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 9).

For many, the inclusion of attempts to ‘Asianise’ and ‘Indigenise’ curriculum signals a clear revision of Australian history and representations of the Australian national identity from ‘monoculture’ to ‘multi-culture’, however, as imagined communities, it must be acknowledged that notions of national unity and social cohesion are beset with ideological tensions and ambivalencies (Salter, 2009), as are the terms ‘Asia’ and ‘Indigenous’.

A closer look at the representation of Asia literacy and Indigenous perspectives constructed through explicit references in proposed curriculum (see Appendix) reveals to what extent the historical narrative in the curriculum moves away from a ‘mono-cultural’ grand narrative. Representations are evident in years 8-10 of the national history curriculum draft. The curriculum structure consists of three historical periods:

- Year 8 – Medieval History (c. 500-1750) investigated through 4 depth studies.
- Year 9 – The Making of the Modern World and Australia (1750-1901) investigated through 4 depth studies.
- Year 10 – Australia in the Modern World (1901-present) investigated through 3 depth studies.

There are varying representations of Asia literacy. In year 8 there is significant engagement with Asian history with the second of the four depth studies dedicated to “Asian Societies” (ACARA, 2010, pp. 30-31). The five choices within this study encompass a range of options including significant periods and events, values and beliefs, everyday life, legacies of and factors contributing to the demise of an Asian society during the time period. In year 9 there is another depth study “Depth Study 2 – Asia and the Pacific World” (pp. 35-37). The four choices within this study are not dedicated solely to Asian history as in year 8, but rather frame engagement with Asia within a wider context of the “Asia-Pacific region (c. 1800)” (p. 35). Furthermore, there is a lens of European influence as the elaborations of this depth study include “investigating the impact of European influence on Asian and Pacific societies” (p. 36) and “explore the ways that Oriental culture travelled back to Britain” (p. 37). Year 10 has the least references to engagement with Asia. There is a brief reference to the Asia-Pacific region in the overview. In “Depth Study 1: The Great War and its Aftermath” (pp. 40-42) elaborations for two of the seven possible choices make reference to World War II; “Japanese submarine attacks on Sydney” (p. 41) and “what total war meant for civilians in Asia” (p. 41). There is a reference to the independence movement in India in “Depth Study 2: Struggles for Freedom and Rights” (p. 43), however this is offered as a choice of 3 possible topics within one of the five options for this depth study.

This suggests that representations of Asia literacy are potentially afforded significant places for recognition and meaningful application. There is “the inclusion of significant content concerning the history of Asia” (ACARA, 2010,

p. 5) in explicit references to Asia in years 8 and 9. Yet, there are key claims from the draft that remain unqualified. Firstly; “Asian history is reflected in its own right” (p. 5). Only year 8 has a sole focus on Asian history through a depth study as the lens of European influence in elaborations in Year 9 suggests focusing on Asia as part of a larger colonial narrative. While the year 8 depth study does support that there are dedicated spaces in the curriculum for Asian history to be “reflected in its own right” (p. 5), it is a concern that the only in-depth engagement with Asian history has been restricted to a ‘medieval’ time period. Secondly, “a feature of the curriculum is the attention given to the telling of the Australian story within the Asian context” (p. 5) is contradicted by the limited acknowledgement of Asia in year 10, which is focused on Australia and the Modern World from 1901. This suggests that the Asian context is not significant to the Australian narrative from 1901 to the present. Moreover, this is compounded by the lack of engagement with perspectives of Asia in the skill strand despite, as previously noted, the problematic nature of perspectives of Asia.

Indigenous perspectives have no explicit reference in year 8. In year 9 there are two references. In “Depth Study 2: Asia and the Pacific World” (ACARA, 2010, pp. 35-37) one of the four choices includes “consequences of contact...between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and ...” (p. 36). Also, one of the five choices for “Depth Study 3: Making of an Australian Nation” (pp. 37-38) looks at “the exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people” (p. 38). In year 10 the “role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women” (p. 41) is noted in the elaborations for one of the seven choices for Depth Study 1: The Great War and its aftermath, and civil rights struggles of Indigenous people form one of the five choices of Depth Study 2: Struggles for Freedom and Rights. In contrast, there is a reference to Indigenous perspectives in the skills strand of year 10 in “Perspective and interpretations”, which is significant as it allows opportunities to engage with “differing perspectives and historical interpretations” (p. 40).

The assurance that the “contribution they [Indigenous peoples] continue to make to contemporary Australia” (ACARA, 2010, p. 5) is included in the draft is challenged by these meager references. Additionally, while representations of Indigenous perspectives are visible in choices given, they appear more subordinate to a European narrative than Asian history as there is no mandatory depth study allocated exclusively to engaging with Indigenous perspectives across a time period spanning c. 500 to the present.

Both Indigenous perspectives and Asia literacy are concerned with challenging Eurocentric narratives however the extent to which this is realised in the ACARA draft is limited. While there is substantial rhetoric in the rationale of the draft to suggest it embraces a multi-cultural Australian history, the myth of monoculture has persisted in the constructions of knowledge and understanding required by the draft. Echoing the US, insufficient engagement with Indigenous

perspectives and Asia literacy fails to overtly challenge a myth of shared Eurocentric monoculture. The draft gives only partial recognition to “the contributions of the Other”(Apple, 2001, pp. 49-50) and there is still the additional threat that such recognition could be further marginalized by reductions in content due to time allocations, as noted by Kiem (2010b) and Patty (2010).

Implications for teacher education

Perhaps we can't change history. It does appear that a multi narrative is yet to be fully realised in history curriculum. If Indigenous perspectives and Asia literacy are not explicitly documented in the curriculum, teachers will not necessarily engage with them. The challenge for teacher education then becomes how to strengthen and develop the sustainability of multi-cultural history so that when teachers have opportunities to engage with these dimensions, they can successfully mediate curriculum. For many, Indigenous perspectives and Asia literacy pose seemingly insurmountable barriers, demanding knowledge and familiarity they may not have and incorporating historical narratives that have been marginalized in many conservative history courses.

The gaps between theory and practice could be considered a self-perpetuating cycle. Low levels of Asia literacy are noted among secondary school graduates (Hill & Thomas 1998; Wilkinson & Milgate 2009). Of these graduates, upon entering teacher education courses, “only a minority of students were interested in further study [of Asia]” (Hill & Thomas, 1998, p. 59) to improve their subject knowledge of Asia. A scan of studies of Asia activities in pre-service primary and secondary teacher education (NALSAS, 2001) confirms that “the majority of our [Australian] teachers have had no opportunity to learn about Asia in their own education” (AEF Advisory Board, 2008).

One approach could be to implement core subjects into teacher education that address Asia literacy and Indigenous perspectives. A nationally commissioned report (Craven *et al*, 2005) found that core Aboriginal Studies subjects as part of teacher education greatly benefited students' ability to and self-confidence in regards to teaching Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal students. The results from this report "imply that introducing mandatory subjects could assist all teachers" (p. 9) and suggests “ideally, teacher education courses should be based on a multifaceted approach to prepare teachers to understand and teach Aboriginal Studies effectively” (p. 11). It is a reasonable concern that if teacher educators are not explicitly addressing the knowledge and skills of these dimensions in tertiary settings, then there is limited hope that pre-service teachers will be able to mediate curriculum for their students.

Add to this the lack of standardised requirements across states and territories as to what is adequate preparation for history teaching and the barriers appear more acute. The History Teacher's Association of Australia has requested a commitment for secondary teachers to complete at least one history major in their first degree and a one year history method program (Kiem, 2010a). Universities will struggle to accommodate this amidst the many competing pedagogical demands already made of teacher education programs.

Asia literacy and Indigenous perspectives also prompt considerations for greater collaboration within and between institutions in an effort to secure available discipline knowledge for students in the areas of Asian and Indigenous history within history majors.

As the national curriculum continues to evolve, and more details are released about the shape of the curriculum and related teacher accreditation requirements, teacher education will face potentially major decisions in order to equip graduates to negotiate an Australian history curriculum that incorporates Asia literacy and Indigenous perspectives.

Notes:

1. For the purposes of grammatical ease 'Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples' will be replaced by 'Indigenous'.
2. For the purposes of grammatical ease 'Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia' will be replaced by 'Asia literacy'. Following Muller and Wong (1991), I take the term 'Asia literate' to encompass a complex endeavour of studies of Asia that encompasses both Asia and 'cultural literacy'.
3. While a closer analysis of the full curriculum is warranted, for the scope of this paper it has been limited to years of secondary schooling in Queensland and further restricted by the scope of the national curriculum draft which currently is not released beyond year 10.

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Appendix A: Explicit Reference to ‘Asia literacy’ (*italics* and ❖) and ‘Indigenous Perspectives’.

National History Curriculum Draft (ACARA, 2010)			
Year level	Content - Knowledge & Understanding		Pedagogy
	Descriptor	Example/elaboration	Skill
8	<p>❖ Depth Study 2: Asian Societies</p> <p><i>A chronological account of significant periods, events and people in the Asian region c. 500-1750</i> OR</p> <p><i>The nature and significance of the beliefs and values of Asian societies such as Hinduism, Buddhism or Shinto</i> OR</p> <p><i>The main characteristics of everyday life in ONE Asian society, including the influence of art, architecture and religion; the roles of men and women; farming, trade and commerce; entertainment; tensions between rulers and ruled</i> OR</p> <p><i>Those factors (political, social, economic, environmental or military) that contributed to the rise and/or to the subsequent demise of the society</i> OR</p> <p><i>The achievements and legacy of the society, including the role played by key historical individuals, groups and/or events</i></p>	<p><i>examining the duration of periods of stability and change, influential events (political, military, geographical), motivations and actions of individuals</i></p> <p><i>explaining the main ideas of either Hinduism, Buddhism or Shinto and their religious practises, the commitment of the people to these religions and the nature of temples and learning</i></p> <p><i>investigating the symbols and conventions used in paintings and sculpture; the design and layout of public areas or villages; the expectations, activities and status of men and women in society; the nature and importance of farming, trade and commerce, popular forms of entertainment and understanding how geography has contributed to the development of an Asian society including identifying features from maps and other sources related to climate, landscape features (mountains, valleys, rivers, sea) and impacts on political unity and the peaceful or warlike nature of the society</i></p> <p><i>identifying factors such as a change of ruler, increasing power of social elites, social cohesion/unrest, decline in population, increasing trade, discovery of new resources, use and overuse of resources, climate and new techniques and approaches to warfare</i></p> <p><i>explaining the conquest of territory, increased wealth from trade, building programs and the founding of new cities, irrigation works, and the spread of ideas and beliefs</i> <i>evaluating and summarising the long term significance of events (e.g., technological and scientific inventions, ideas (the Asian cultural legacy) and people, e.g. Confucius, Kublai Khan, Ming dynasty emperor Hung-wu and Shogun Yoshimitsu)</i></p>	
9	<p>❖ Depth Study 2: Asia and the Pacific World</p> <p><i>The societies that made up the Asia-Pacific region c.1800</i> Or</p> <p><i>The impact of European influence in the Asia-Pacific region, with a particular emphasis on ONE of the following: Japan, China, Indochina OR the Dutch East Indies and Fiji</i> OR</p> <p><i>The consequences of contact, intended and unintended, between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Europeans in Australia, and in ONE other part of the Asia-Pacific</i> OR</p>	<p><i>understanding the locations of societies that made up the American, Asian, Australasian and Pacific world, creating an accurate map that shows where Asian and Pacific countries existed and their geographical relationship to Australia</i> <i>mapping points of contact</i></p> <p><i>investigating the impact of European influence on Asian and Pacific societies including the effect of trade, the undermining of traditional industries, the growth of an administrative class, the indentured labourer system, missionary activity, growth of resistance both to foreigners and their own leaders and in the case of Japan, the quest for modernisation</i></p> <p><i>analysing the personal experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as described by themselves in primary and secondary sources, looking at the reasons, circumstances and consequences of two comparative incidents of colonial resistance, examining and assessing conflicting stories of events such as stock raids, punitive expeditions and massacres, assessing the importance of religious initiatives in (a) assimilating Indigenous peoples and (b) in inspiring resistance, analysing the issues of Indigenous displacement, susceptibility to disease, killing of livestock, differing values attached to the notion of ownership of land, reading stories of survival and resistance reflected in oral accounts, artworks and other sources</i></p>	

	<p><i>The cultural influence of the Asia-Pacific region on European and Australian society</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depth Study 3: Making of an Australian nation <p>The early years of the Australian nation, including the introduction of the White Australia policy, exclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, voting rights of women and the introduction of the basic wage [1 descriptor of a choice of 5]</p>	<p><i>explore the ways that Oriental culture travelled back to Britain</i></p>	
10	<p>❖ 4. Overview of Australia in the Modern World</p> <p><i>The transformation of the modern world as a consequence of radical political actions and ideas, global conflict and attempts to deal with these events through international cooperation, including Australia's influence in the United Nations, the Middle East and the Asia-Pacific region</i></p> <p>❖ Depth Study 1. The Great War and its aftermath [2 choices of 7]</p> <p><i>The origins of World War II and Australia's role in events</i> OR</p> <p><i>The significance of World War II, including the Holocaust and use of the atomic bomb</i></p> <p>❖ Depth Study 2: Struggles for Freedom and Rights [2 choices of 5]</p> <p><i>The origins and consequences of anti-colonial movements and civil rights movements, one to be chosen from (a) the 20th century independence movement in India</i> OR</p> <p>The civil rights struggles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with reference to government policies (including protection, assimilation, integration, reconciliation and self determination), the 1967 Referendum, the Mabo decision and the Apology to the Stolen Generations</p>	<p><i>comparing the political situation in the world of 1900 with that of 2000, including the nature of conflict, international cooperation, the dominant powers in the world, globalisation and Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region</i></p> <p><i>investigating why and how Australia became involved in World War II detailing Australia's involvement in selected theatres of war in Europe, North Africa and Asia, understanding the impact of war upon Australia and Australians, including the bombings of Darwin, the Japanese submarine attacks on Sydney, Australian POW experiences, role of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen and women</i></p> <p><i>understanding the social, political and scientific impact of the war including the nature and effects of the Holocaust, what total war meant for civilians in Asia, Europe and Russia; developments in science and technology</i></p> <p><i>analysing the course and outcomes of non-violent and violent campaigns for independence in India through the contribution of individuals such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, groups such as the Indian Congress Party and politicians such as Clement Attlee</i></p> <p>analysing twentieth and twenty-first century attempts to improve Aboriginal conditions including assimilationist policies: the Freedom Rides, the Wave Hill Movement, the 1967 referendum, the Mabo decision, the deaths in custody investigation, the stolen generations commission</p>	<p>7. Perspectives and interpretations. Identify and account for differing perspectives and historical interpretations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognising that people have different points of view of the past as a result of past experiences, e.g. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives