Australian Educational Reform and Its Implications for the Artistry of Teaching

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Abstract
Teachers in Visual Arts classrooms regularly address the subject matter of artistry. However, the practices of teachers are themselves examples of artistry. A conception of teaching as artistry recognizes the complex and relational nature of teaching as a professional practice that develops over time. In exploring the artistry of teaching, this paper presents a relational framework for investigating teaching practice. The framework is used to investigate the potential impact of current educational reforms in Australia on the artistry of teaching. Discussion explores implications for the teaching profession, for secondary visual arts teaching and for initial teacher education.

Introduction: The position of teachers in educational reform in Australia
Since 2008 there has been a strengthening national presence in education in Australia. The reform agenda has encompassed testing through NAPLAN (National Assessment Program Literacy and Numeracy); accountability of schools through publication of NAPLAN results and the comparison of ‘like’ schools on the ‘My School’ website; a national curriculum; a national building plan and national partnerships. The framework of the Australian Curriculum was presented in the 2008 Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008), and is being developed in a three-phase process overseen by the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA). The political discourse surrounding these reforms has focused on social justice and equity; seeking better outcomes for students; and the need for a world-class curriculum that provides global opportunities for Australians. However, within the discourse there has been little recognition of research that demonstrates that it is teachers and their practices that make the greatest difference to student outcomes, particularly in relation to disadvantage (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006; Hattie, 2009; Townsend, 2001).

In this paper I present a conception of teaching practice as artistry that identifies the central place of teachers and teaching practice within any consideration of education. In discussing this conception, I develop a framework for understanding teaching practice, which will be applied in the context of the current educational reforms. Implications for teaching, for visual arts teaching in particular and for teacher education are discussed. In conclusion, I identify specific areas of research potential.

Teaching as artistry: A conception of teaching practice
As van Manen (1999) and Green (2009) acknowledge, practice is a term rarely theorised but often used in a variety of ways in education. As such, it warrants significant attention. In this discussion, I consider teaching practice as organised and enacted educational activity that is multilayered and embedded in theory, experience and context. These aspects of practice interrelate as layers (Green, 2009). In identifying aspects of practice in teaching, there exists a body of literature likening it to artistry. Rubin (1985), Treagust and Harrison (1999) and Mitchell (1999) have used ‘artistry’ specifically to identify the characteristics of expert or skilled teachers. Mitchell (1999) and Stenhouse (1988) employed the ‘teacher as artist’ simile to consider the creative aspects of teaching. While these conceptions provide useful starting points, they are limited, as they consider artistry as synonymous with a creative approach, and focus on its existence as a characteristic of accomplished teaching. If the term artistry is considered in relation to Rubin’s (1985) definition of skill, originality, flair, dexterity, ingenuity, virtuosity, discrimination and judgement, it can be applied to all teaching practice. At every level of experience and accomplishment, teachers demonstrate different degrees and aspects of these qualities. The teacher engaged in their individual artistry is working within traditions of the field, but is also making effective professional judgements that reflect personal autonomy and adaptation to a range of situations. Through the ongoing process of ‘becoming’ a teacher (Kemmis & Smith, 2008),

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Investigating teaching as artistry

Teaching practice can be investigated to identify aspects and degrees of artistry. I have developed a nine-cell framework shown in Figure 1 to conceptualise or observe teaching practice. It uses a matrix structure to identify elements of teaching practice as objects of inquiry. The relational structure then allows consideration of relations between elements to investigate the effects of factors related to context, theory and experience. The framework is not designed as an end point of an exhaustive investigation of practice, but provides a model to investigate selected aspects of practice.

The matrix has two axes. The horizontal axis contains three elements representing structures (or educational message systems) and defines the three educational message systems of pedagogy, curriculum and assessment (Bernstein, 1971). Curriculum is “the substantive content of learning and its organization, as subjects and topics” (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p.6) and as such, it is the content. The teacher becomes the mediator, condensing and selecting information to present to students. Pedagogy is known as the art and science of teaching (van Manen, 1999) and encompasses the process, procedures and strategies that teachers use to promote learning. Assessment “involves gathering, interpreting and describing information about student achievement” (Brady & Kennedy, 2007, p.220). The vertical axis contains three elements representing agency (or stakeholders) and defines stakeholders as learners, teachers and community. Learners can be considered as a group and as individuals. As unique beings, learners experience schooling differently due to their differing pasts, presents and futures. Teachers are identified as mediators of curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, who interact with learners and the community. The inclusion of community articulates the connection between schools, experiences outside schools, and people with an interest in schooling. Such interest has increased recently as the private, enclosed space of the classroom becomes more publicly visible (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008, p.225).

The nine content cells represent the space of intersection of the axes, with the intersection representing the relationship between stakeholders and educational message systems. Explaining the reference of each cell, a guiding question is...
posed. This question/s outlines how the cell is used. In application propositions are placed within each cell to identify observations or assertions relating to teaching practice. The cells inter-relate within the matrix structure to investigate relationships across cells.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Curriculum</th>
<th>Pedagogy</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learners</strong></td>
<td>1.1 Nationally standardized curricula; some curricula reduction and narrowing of content; range of mobile learners across states and territories; diverse learners</td>
<td>2.1 Engagement determined by school-based implementation; little attention to learning theory; reduction of engagement with some areas; focus on individual achievement in relation to specified and consistent standards</td>
<td>3.1 Engagement in national testing at two yearly intervals (NAPLAN); &amp; school-based assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Teachers</strong></td>
<td>1.2 Interpretation of standardized national curriculum; interpretation according to state-based syllabi; engagement in professional learning</td>
<td>2.2 Efficiency and a focus on measurable outcomes; teachers as operative of external standards; defensive position potentially relates to defensive pedagogies</td>
<td>3.2 Evaluation of learning in relation to standardized testing; use of school-based assessment in relation to curriculum standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td>1.3 Community consultation on draft national curriculum (front-end); stated focus on social justice; equity and a globalised education; limited opportunities to engage with community issues</td>
<td>2.3 Potentially limited exploration of authentic learning opportunities; limited opportunities for responsiveness to community</td>
<td>3.3 National testing regime (NAPLAN); ‘My School’ public accountability and comparison; perceived community demand for information; school-based reporting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: The implications of Australian educational reform on teaching practice

Theorizing the implications of national education reforms for teaching as artistry

I will now address the guiding questions within the relational framework in relation to educational reform. The aim of this speculative exercise is to conceptualise the implications of educational reform for teaching practice and particularly for artistry within teaching practice. While propositions are placed within every cell, the discussion will focus on the definitional cells of 1.1, 2.2 and 3.3. These cells provide foundational propositions in relation to all framework elements. The application of the framework can be seen in Figure 2.

The propositions in Cell 1.1 represent the relation between curriculum and learners. The nature of the national curriculum produces a necessarily standardized curriculum that restructures existing curricula. As stated by McNeil (2000, p.3):

“Standardization reduces the quality and quantity of what is taught and learned in schools. The immediate negative effect of standardization is the overwhelming finding of a study of schools where the imposition of standardized controls reduced the scope and quality of course content, diminished the role of teachers, and distanced students from active learning”.

In the case of the Arts, where the five distinct artforms of Dance, Drama, Media Arts, Visual Arts and Music have been unified under one umbrella, standardisation will lead to reductive curricula that ‘dumbs down’ in an effort to find common ground. In addition, the reduction of time proposed in the paper has implications for the integrity of each discipline in terms of a related body of knowledge and expertise. While the standardisation of curriculum addresses issues of mobility and consistency across states and territories, it is also noted that learners are diverse. This introduces issues of relevancy and highlights the potential problems of standardisation for meeting the needs of diverse learners.

Cell 2.2 relates to pedagogy and teachers. As noted, the completion of this
cell is predictive and determined by the cells in the first and third column. While government policy has directed curriculum and assessment, the responsibility for enactment will be transferred to teachers, who will become ‘operative’ of those decisions (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p.6). It is anticipated that, given the focus on high-stakes testing and national standards, the pedagogy of teachers will be further focused on measurable outcomes. In this environment, the processes of learning are de-prioritized, and interpretation of curriculum is influenced by the need to maximize achievement in assessment. This devalues the centrality of pedagogy within teaching practice and limits the actions of teachers.

Cell 3.3 addresses assessment in relation to community. While assessment is, and should primarily be, a pedagogical tool, the propositions within this cell clearly show reforms are using assessment for political purposes. Assessment is identified as driven by national testing and school-based assessment. The public nature of ‘My school’, and the comparative use of NAPLAN data foregrounds accountability, with the reputation and status of schools and teachers reflected in the public results. At the same time, media attention has created community interest in ‘My school’, which has been interpreted as demand for such information. This creates pressure on teachers to achieve outcomes that ‘present’ well. Power thus operates through assessment with the publication of results positioning students, teachers and schools in relation to knowledge (Hayes, Mills, Christie and Lingard, 2006). For schools, who will be concerned with maintaining or improving their position, it is highly likely that efforts and resources, and school-based assessment will be directed toward those activities that enhance achievement in relation to the publicly available information, potentially at the expense of others.

Bernstein (1971) asserted that curriculum, pedagogy and assessment exist in symbiotic relationship and a change in one affects the practices of the others. Looking across the cells, it is clear much is known about the testing regime implemented in the first phases of reforms and some information is known about the national curriculum. The effects on pedagogy are less clear. Analysis supports Lingard’s (2010) suggestion that pedagogy is driven by a focus on assessment and curriculum. Within this disconnection is potential for developing pedagogies that are defensive (McNeil, 2000) in meeting the needs of curriculum and assessment, rather than productive (Lingard et al, 2001) or constructively aligned (Biggs, 1996). Significantly, defensive pedagogies are shown to limit teacher effects.

The implications for teaching artistry in schools and in teacher education
Considering the propositions, it is clear implications for teaching practice have not been engaged with in the reform process. Rather, the governmental imposition of externally produced documents and processes that direct teaching practice, transfers authority and agency to outside forces, negating the agency of teachers and limiting their practice. This suggests a mistrust of teachers and a top-down gaze that sees them as ‘less-than’. Teaching becomes lower-level work after the broader vision is articulated, demonstrating poor understanding of the complexity of teaching practice and disrespect for what teachers know and do. It de-professionalises teachers and, in placing them in a defensive position, limits potential for artistry.

Teachers are further marginalised by the position of Visual Arts as part of The Arts and within the broader curriculum. The standardisation of the curriculum and its reduction potentially undermines the history of the Visual Arts education field and its international standing, and the developed artistry of visual arts teachers. It takes focus away from teaching practice, undermining the ability of the field to respond to recommendations in the National Review of Visual Education (Davis, 2008) that more should be known about what happens in classrooms.

Teacher education engages with teaching practice and developing artistry, and provides professional learning and advocacy. Changes to Australian education are of significance to teacher education. The timeline for reform is ambitious, and this has implications for teacher education. Developing programs that reflect the national vision, while also meeting state-based needs and identifying spaces for the development of autonomous professionals who can engage in teaching practice with artistry appears challenging.

Conclusion: The implications for research and action
It is clear the reforms have significant implications for artistry in teaching practice. Teachers’ voices, their understanding of teaching practice as embedded in theory, experience and context, and discussions of the implications of reforms for teaching practice are relatively absent from politically driven discussions. In prioritising standardisation and accountability in this political agenda, it is likely the autonomy, creativity and originality teachers can exercise as part of their individual artistry will be significantly minimised. We must strongly assert the central importance of teachers and of teaching practice. This requires consistent reference to evidence of practice, and in particular, of practice that illustrates the artistry of teaching. It is vitally important that constructions of teachers as operative ‘others’ be countered by research that identifies teachers as professional generators of change who make the most significant difference to students’ lives and outcomes.

**References:**


