

SEAA Tomorrow: SOSE and the future

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The twenty-first birthday of the Social Education Association of Australia is a cause for celebration. Since SEAA was born in the early nineteen eighties, we have witnessed remarkable developments in the learning area, with real improvements in the range, depth and quality of what students now experience as the SOSE curriculum. We also have a much more sophisticated understanding of the curriculum and teaching processes needed to implement it. I would also argue that the origins of the SOSE curriculum were closely related to the development of SEAA itself.

On the other hand, there is much still to do before we could claim that we have a genuinely well established professional culture among all SOSE practitioners, or a consensus about curriculum priorities and the means to achieving them. Some of the challenges we face are perennial ones intrinsic to the field; some need only a genuine will and concerted effort to resolve.

I see my brief in this paper to be twofold: to provide a commentary on where we've been, and to offer some thoughts on continuing the work which SEAA has so effectively promoted. Knowing where we've come from is important in understanding the issues which face us today. The curriculum is after all what poststructuralists would refer to as a palimpsest, a text bearing the traces of past inscriptions and revisions, and its development gives insights into its present state. The second task, proposing future directions, is an indulgence that is kindly given to grey haired men and women in the optimistic hope that they may have gathered some wisdom over the years. In this case, I will offer some thoughts on what I see to be key issues for the future of SOSE.

Social education: conception and conflict

I cannot provide any systematic history of the learning area here, but would draw attention to what I believe were important issues and milestones in the development of SOSE and SEAA, and the connections between the two.

The direct origins of SEAA and SOSE might be identified in the nineteen seventies and the attempts to give social education an identity and a more comprehensive scope as a field. The establishment of the National

Committee on Social Science Teaching and the Curriculum Development Centre were important initiatives, signalling the first forays of the Commonwealth government into curriculum development. An important outcome was the Social Education Materials Project (SEMP), with its innovative approach to materials development and school based curriculum decision making. SEMP was unlike anything we had seen before. It was stimulating, creative and forward looking, and opened up opportunities for addressing perennial and contemporary issues in exciting and engaging ways.

However, SEMP was one of the first examples of what has become a common problem for SOSE, and one which I want to comment on later. SEMP was threatened by political censorship. It seemed that the attempt to promote an open and questioning approach to our society's taken for granted assumptions, to allow for student conclusions or interpretations which were not predetermined, and to expand the curriculum beyond its traditional focus, was deemed to be unacceptably radical, or a conspiracy by some sectional interest. The Queensland government at the time ensured SEMP's notoriety by banning it from schools, sending departmental officers into libraries and staff rooms to physically withdraw the corrupting items.

An author of the unit on Family in the SEMP materials commented that

. . . there was not necessarily a spectrum of opinion on aspects of family life from right to left, or from conservative to radical – but a spectrum from tolerant to intolerant: a far more limited thing.
(Madin, 1980, p. 50)

This story has continued, with the writing of the National Statement in SOSE attracting similar controversy. In fact, one commentator has described the entire national curriculum as 'based on the belief that education should be used as an instrument to bring about social change, in particular, to create a society that embodies a left wing, progressive view in matters of gender, ethnicity and class' (Donnelly, 1993, p. 37). The crises in the writing of the national statement in SOSE were further evidence of these controversies (Gilbert, Gordon, Hoepper and Land, 1992; Maye, 1998).

Yet again, in 2000, the Queensland SOSE syllabus was attacked in Brisbane's main newspaper for 'indoctrinating our children with Left-wing values', and for being 'stuffed to the gills with pro-environment preaching' and 'hostile to our society because it is based on the value of social justice where students seek to deconstruct dominant views of society' (Bolt, 2000, p. 33).

The issues raised in these kinds of debates are inevitable in a field like SOSE, where definitions of important learnings are closely related to notions of the good life, and explicitly linked to values of social justice, democratic process and sustainability. However, in the seventies we had little idea that this kind of controversy was to become so persistent. The ideas which drove SEMP and the NCSST were a desire to rethink the field, to expand its scope and to give it a new energy more relevant to the times. Similar sentiments and energies ultimately produced the national curriculum statement.

Enter SEAA

There is no doubt that SEAA, along with other professional associations, played an important role in the development of the national curriculum statement in SOSE. We can see the kind of thinking which led to the national statement in a number of SEAA documents produced during the eighties and nineties. *Social Education for the Eighties* (SEAA, 1984, p. 3) reviewed a changing Australian society, and emphasised the fact that social education

is more than just a way of organising knowledge *about* social interaction. It is particularly concerned with assisting people to function effectively *in* social situations so that they have some influence on the world around them.

Social education was defined in the document as

A process by which people actively:

- gain understandings of their social worlds which go beyond common sense;
- develop skills in relating to others; and as a result
- are better empowered to influence and change their immediate and wider worlds.

The document was an argument for the kind of social education needed for the contemporary and future worlds, rather than a curriculum framework in itself. However, the ideas which drove its writing can be seen in the authors' statement of 'guiding perspectives for social education in Australia which we believe to be appropriate for our times' (p. 4). The proposed directions for social education included an emphasis on:

- interpersonal and communicative competence
- knowledge and application of social science methodologies
- Australian studies
- cultural pluralism
- recognition and critical analysis of human rights
- global perspectives in all studies
- skills for participation and social action

- social education as life-long social learning.

Produced by people working in Education Ministries, schools and universities around the country, *Social Education for the Eighties* was a loosely structured statement of important issues for the learning area. While it did not propose a curriculum framework as such, it was evidence of a growing consensus that social education was an important need in the Australian curriculum, and of the kind of social education which would meet that need.

A more concrete response to this need appeared six years later in SEAA's next major curriculum statement. *Social Education in the Nineties: A basic right for every person* (SEAA, 1990) was a restatement of the earlier rationale, but also contained a section entitled 'Towards a common framework for social education in Australia'. The rationale in this document was more comprehensive and precise than its predecessor's, as the following definition shows:

Social education is the active process by which people, through drawing on personal and public knowledge:

- develop and apply UNDERSTANDINGS which help them to explain the origins, diversity and dynamic nature of society, including the interactions among societies, cultures, individuals and environments
- develop and practise VALUES and sensibilities which are crucial to a just and democratic society and a sustainable world
- develop and practise SKILLS in investigating society, discussing issues, tackling problems, making decisions and working co-operatively with others
- take ACTIONS enlightened and empowered by these understandings, values and skills, which might contribute to the achievement of more desirable futures for all.

(SEAA, 1990, p. 5)

There is a clarity and strength about this statement, especially in its reference to values and actions, which I believe indicates the growing confidence about what a social education curriculum should include. This confidence was also evident in the development of a conceptual framework for a curriculum which would achieve the purposes. The framework was constructed around what it called five basic components of the social world, namely:

Societies, groups and systems
 Cultures
 Human beings (persons)
 Places and environments
 Times past, present and future

These components provided a model around which important understandings, values, skills and actions were identified. With the exception of the focus on persons, the similarities to the conceptual strands of the National Statement in SOSE are obvious. SEAA had provided an important forerunner of the national statement, further evidence I believe of the extent to which SEAA's influence far outstretched its size.

The achievements of SOSE

The national curriculum statement for SOSE (Australian Education Council, 1994) was a great achievement for education in this country. Despite its controversial birth, it established an approach to social education which was both comprehensive and soundly based on a coherent integrative model. For the first time, the curriculum gave serious attention to culture as a crucial basis for understanding. It emphasised the study of Indigenous cultures from their own perspectives, and recognised the power of popular culture and the media in the construction of identity for all of us. It provided a context in which gender issues could be seen as a significant dimension of experience and a major influence on the social arrangements of our society.

The national statement also recognised for the first time the potential for effective participation in society of legal, political and economic learning for all students. It was a major step forward that these studies were framed in process and conceptual terms rather than the earlier civics tradition of rote learning of information about the systems. The early SEAA emphasis on effective participation was finally being addressed.

The statement also established environmental education in its proper place in the SOSE curriculum, with the value of sustainability being a central focus of our relationship with place and space. It provided for a comprehensive study of our history sequenced from school entry to the post-compulsory years, but avoided the barrenness of some approaches to the past by linking it with other conceptual strands and important cross-curricular perspectives.

For the moment at least, we can be reasonably satisfied that SOSE or its equivalent has a firm foundation. Australian young people can now experience a comprehensive and developmentally appropriate introduction into the best contemporary understandings of our society and its environment. They can develop an important range of skills and experiences and appreciate core values in more discriminating ways. By combining these elements they will be able to participate more effectively in their world and construct desirable futures for themselves and others.

The health of the field is also indicated by the activity in recent national projects in citizenship, history, Asian studies and enterprise education and a host of State initiatives.

However, as the controversies reviewed above indicate, it is clear that we have yet to achieve a consensus about the desirable directions for SOSE. While I have said that these controversies are intrinsic to the field, we need to have some way of dealing with them. Otherwise, they will continue to distract from important future development; in particular, they will constrain the extent to which the values underlying the SOSE curriculum will be adequately treated. I see the place of values to be a key issue in the future of SOSE, and one which we have not yet adequately dealt with.

To understand these controversies and to find a way through them, it will help to stand back from the specifics of SOSE, and look at some general patterns and debates in curriculum. I would argue that the conflicts over SOSE are in part evidence of more fundamental conflicts over the curriculum in general.

SOSE and an entitlement approach to curriculum

Cope and Kalantzis (Cope, 1986; Cope and Kalantzis, 1990) have identified two major but opposing traditions in curriculum debate in the social studies, summarised in the table below.

On the one hand, there is the traditional approach where the essential core of the curriculum is the declarative knowledge it contains, its social content; the curriculum is centrally prescribed; social values are seen to be universal and absolute and derived from perennial ideals; and knowledge is seen to comprise a series of fixed social truths. At the opposite end of the spectrum is the progressive view of the curriculum, where the substantive essence is not predetermined but arises from an open inquiry process; the key content is based on contemporary issues; the approach to social values is relativist; and knowledge is seen to be the result of this open process of inquiry.

Curriculum dimension	Traditional approach	Progressivist approach	Entitlement approach
<i>major substantive emphasis</i>	curriculum as presented social content	curriculum as open process	curriculum as discursive empowerment

<i>criteria for selection</i>	prescribed curriculum	curriculum relevant to contemporary issues	curriculum of expanding significance and alternative futures
<i>source of social values</i>	universalistic curriculum	relativist curriculum	culturally immanent curriculum
<i>epistemological emphasis</i>	a curriculum of fixed social truths	inquiry process curriculum	critical reconstruction of knowledge for just, democratic and sustainable futures

Table 1: Three approaches to the social science curriculum

Cope and Kalantzis (1990) argue that neither of these approaches provides students with mastery of the knowledge on which effective participation in society can be based. The traditional approach presents knowledge which is abstracted from experience. Since it assumes universal values and fixed social truths, it must see as misguided the different perspectives which people bring to social situations and issues. Essentially, different perspectives, if acknowledged at all, become errors to be corrected. As a result, it sees the diverse motives, beliefs and meanings in a multicultural society as distractions from the real truth. The aim is to have students accept the views and conclusions handed down, and to assume that these will suffice in their dealings with everyday life. While discussion may be encouraged, its purpose is to lead students to predetermined conclusions. Since students are largely passive in this process, the means for applying the dominant understandings and values will be compliance. Such a relationship with knowledge and values is an inadequate base for building desirable futures. The history of social education is redolent with this inculcation approach to curriculum, and it underlies many of the criticisms of social education, as evidenced in the comment on SEMP quoted earlier.

The progressivist approach sees knowledge as constructed through individual experience and driven by individual need and interest. The source of the curriculum is not prescribed from some dominant perspective which is assumed to be universal, but is determined by contemporary issues which become the occasion for exploring personal feelings and values. Since the substance of the curriculum is open

inquiry and the individual construction of knowledge, traditions of knowledge and values are less important than the formation of personal preferences and opinions. The difficulty here is that without traditional forms of knowledge or some supra-individual basis for values, there are no criteria for deciding what is an adequate solution to a problem other than individual preference. Equally, a commitment to the individual construction of knowledge finds it difficult to accommodate the technical knowledge required to participate effectively in existing social institutions and practices. These features make the progressivist approach an inadequate base for collaborative engagement with issues and for enacting desirable futures in real social situations. In our own recent history, I would argue that the SEMP initiative was an example of this progressivist approach, and that its failure to see these weaknesses made it vulnerable to the criticisms levelled at it.

I would argue that the solution to this dilemma, a third way if you like, is an entitlement approach to social education, where students are given the technical mastery and the best available knowledge of concepts and values as resources for building a desirable society. Students are entitled to be provided with the concepts, processes and skills associated with contemporary institutions and practices, and required for effective participation in society, but students are also entitled to apply these learnings in ways which respect their cultural origins and their personal desires and commitments. Mastery is not a form of compliance, but an empowering resource for transforming the world in response to future challenges. Building the future is a process of working collaboratively with what currently exists to improve the welfare of all – desirable futures are immanent in the present and future directions can only be determined by a critical assessment of current arrangements.

For such learning to be authentic and useful, it must be applied in a collaborative context where decision-making and action skills are developed through authentic pedagogy as close as possible to real social situations. In this approach, traditional and contemporary values are not assumed to be absolute, but are seen as resources which allow us to understand and critique current social arrangements, and to scrutinise the adequacy of these values as a base for desirable futures. For instance, the ultimate grounds for assessing values of democracy and justice lie in the moral imperatives of respecting people's individual integrity and worth, and the reflexive criteria which the values provide for themselves and for each other.

In other words, mastery of contemporary knowledge forms and an exploration of core social values are bases for building desirable futures. As such, they cannot be prescribed as unchanging absolutes free from critical assessment, nor seen as purely individual choices free from the

test of application in collaborative and democratic action. An entitlement curriculum would then

- be discursively empowering (through mastery of technical discourses);
- include a negotiated curriculum (to incorporate present felt needs and develop collaborative decision-making);
- be culturally responsive (to recognise and incorporate different views, perspectives and aspirations);
- include immanent critique focusing on an emancipatory ethos and improvement of the human condition;
- focus on active participation, initiative and personal and social adaptability and change;
- be governed by values of entitlement, competence and transformation.

This analysis of approaches to curriculum is useful in considering recent debates and developments in the SOSE learning area. For instance, the Discovering Democracy project has had to confront different views on citizenship education, with some wanting to prescribe an abstracted traditional approach while others prefer an open inquiry approach. An entitlement approach to citizenship education can help resolve these dilemmas. Similarly, recent debates over the teaching of history, or the promotion of enterprise education can be seen in similar terms.

The difficulty for SEAA members and all who would want to apply this kind of approach is that it is controversial. To promote a critical approach to contemporary social arrangements, to argue that there are competing perspectives in the interpretation of any social situation, to see values as tools for deciding desirable futures rather than prescriptions to be followed, is to invite criticism as either a left wing conspiracy or anarchy, relativistic anomy or authoritarianism (or, contradictorily, all of these). The answer must be that if our young people are to be given the resources to construct desirable futures in democratic ways, then we cannot avoid such an approach. The Social Education Association of Australia has lived with these debates for 21 years. It has played a crucial role in the progress that has been made. I am sure it will continue to do so.

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