

## The new curriculum micro-managers

By Mercurius Goldstein

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Where would you find a free-marketeer advocating Soviet-style centralisation, and where would you find a latter-day leftie promoting the individual's right to choose? In the schools debate, that's where.

In the perennial hunting-season on teachers that passes for the education debate in Australia, there is a surprising level of enthusiasm on the part of liberal commentators to standardise, nationalise, prescribe and centralise what is taught in our schools.

Now, there are many sensible arguments for making school assessments more consistent between the states, ensuring state curricula are broadly comparable, and that teachers adhere to some national professional standards. There have been key national learning priorities established since the late 1980s, and support for a national approach is steadily growing on both sides of politics and among professional bodies such as the New South Wales Institute of Teachers.

But alongside these constructive developments, many others criticise the near-total disappearance of prescribed content from many subjects. Fewer and fewer syllabus documents (at least at junior high-school level) now list a defined body of knowledge that students must be able to regurgitate. Rather, they contain qualitative statements describing what students will be able to do. This has led to great frustration on the part of many teachers who claim they can't make sense of the new curriculum, and led many conservative commentators to call for the re-introduction of prescribed content.

Such critics tend to think of schools as delivery-points for a pre-fabricated experience of education, and teachers as technicians operating a 13-year assembly line. But if you instead see schools as dynamic systems that respond to (and influence) the needs of the community in which they find themselves, and teachers as fully-fledged professionals exercising discretion and judgment, then the idea of prescribing content starts to look absurd. For it's all very well to demand that schools teach a laundry-list of facts and skills. But which facts? Which skills?

What about the "fact" that jet engines couldn't possibly work? My grandfather received honours in engineering from a prestigious European university in the 1930s for a thesis which concluded just such a fact. Fortunately, this fact was not widely disseminated through a "facts and skills" school system.

As for skills, I distinctly recall my high-school careers adviser telling me, circa 1990, that he couldn't advise a career for my class because in ten years' time most of us would be working in jobs that did not yet exist. At the time, I thought "yeah, right". But when I look around now at the ranks of web-designers, mobile phone dealers, call centre managers, GST accountants and pet therapists, I have to concede he was onto something.

Granted, these are anecdotal examples, but they highlight an important point: facts and skills come and go, but students will continue to benefit from critical thinking skills and "learning how to learn" throughout their lives. Against this background, what use is a fossilised body of prescribed content that becomes obsolete shortly after graduation day? Or even worse, knowledge that remains relatively reliable, but is of no use to anybody outside a specialised field (for example, the periodic table of the elements).

So why have otherwise liberal thinkers come over all politburo with desire to establish a national curriculum? I believe their enthusiasm for such uber-structures arises from the greater concentration of power that would devolve to the Federal Government (or education department), and the tighter control they will gain over content, rather than from any genuine desire to promote choice.

One such is Kevin Donnelly who fills innumerable column-inches in *The Australian* with examples of textbook and syllabus material he considers to be subversive, distasteful or educationally unsound.

Donnelly's approach is anything but "pro-choice". In April 2006, he **denigrated SCEGGS Redlands School** for the infamous "Marxist *Othello*" exam question. This alarm, supported by *The Australian's* editorial, led to a sustained attack on the principal of SCEGGS and a very public questioning of the school's educational credentials in general. At least doctors and scientists manage to keep their professional disagreements contained, for the most part, to the dusty corners of journals and academic conferences.

Although the well-heeled SCEGGS Board can undoubtedly afford a good lawyer, the deeper question remains: if this is the level of choice that such commentators really wish to offer us - a forensic prescription for which examination questions are permissible - then what choice will we have left? Any flavour we like, as long as it's vanilla?

Why should liberals of any stripe be troubled by what is taught in schools, when parental choice and the free operation of the market, they would have us believe, will result in the best-quality outcome all round? If parents are happy for their daughters to attempt a marxist, feminist or racial interpretation of *Othello*, and are willing to pay thousands of dollars a year for the privilege, why should any true liberal quibble over it?

It thinks that behind the rhetoric of choice in education lies a deep suspicion on the part of conservatives that parents, teachers and students, left to their own devices, will not make the right (sic) choices. So they advocate centralisation of the curriculum at a federal level, from which lofty heights they can tell us what "choices" are available to us. Of course, conservatives are not alone in a desire to monopolise the curriculum. Militant secularists are quite apoplectic at the suggestion of any spiritual or pastoral guidance in schools, and many ideological leftists would sooner gnaw off their own arms than allow a local business to sponsor their swimming carnival, and so on.

What we are all missing in this debate (teachers included) is that an outcomes-based curriculum gives teachers the opportunity to exercise the one thing they have been seeking acknowledgement for all these years: professional judgment. An outcomes-based curriculum says to teachers, in effect, "Here is where your students need to get to. Your job is to apply your professional judgment and experience to the findings of the

academy, and collegiate input, to make it happen." Such curricula aim to give teachers, parents and students the freedom they need to operate in the best interests of the learner.

So those who yearn for a syllabus packed full of prescribed content should at least do away with any pretence that they support choice in education. Likewise, those who advocate choice must accept that some schools will choose content of which they disapprove. That is why there are different schools meeting the needs of different students in different communities.

But then, other people's choices are always the hardest to accept, aren't they?

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