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INQUIRY INTO ACADEMIC STANDARDS OF SCHOOL EDUCATION

Submission regarding the Implementation of the Curriculum Framework in Western Australia

OVERVIEW

The implementation of the Curriculum Framework in Western Australia is an unprecedented educational disaster in the history of curriculum reform in this state.

The WA Outcomes Based Courses have been rolled out, academic year by academic year for the past eight years.

A controversial decision was made by the Gallop Labor Government to continue this rollout into Upper School Courses in 2006. The first OBE upper school course to be launched was the English Course of Study. Eight other courses were due for implementation in 2007, but due to great community alarm, teacher backlash and press opposition, this has been postponed until 2008.

There are many contentious issues, but one main problem is that the syllabus-material of the WA OBE courses are separately derived from the Curriculum Framework on a school-by-school basis. As an example, a school in the Kimberley might study the Ord River in geography; a school in Perth might study the Swan River. This all sounds well and good- until it comes to the business of setting tertiary entrance exams with high stakes assessment.

The Curriculum Council in WA has solved the syllabus-free assessment problem with a system of “levelling”- a teacher-derived measurement of a “student’s progress on a learning journey” along the outcomes continuum. The level attained on the outcomes is then rounded to two decimal places, forming the Tertiary Entrance Rank Score.

There has been community uproar over this proposal, and a report into the validity of this educational practice has condemned the levels as unsuitable for fine grained assessment.

PROBLEMS WITH OBE PEDAGOGY

Another problem is that the WA OBE Courses of Study are not really “courses” as teachers have previously understood the term. They are a complete curriculum package which encompasses course content (or lack of it), prescribed teaching methods and compulsory assessment procedures.

The OBE Courses of Study are in fact a methodology- a sort of “Montessori-on-the-cheap”.

This methodology is becoming more controversial by the day because it simply isn’t working. Results of a series of recent academic tests have revealed that a large proportion of students in primary and lower-secondary schools are not learning under this system.

The key feature of the WA OBE methodology is teacher-independent; applied-content; task-based learning by small groups of students.

There is a large amount of Curriculum Council documentation which strictly regulates how the teacher is to establish and assess independent small-group learning tasks. The whole process is meant to be subject to rigorous moderation by the Curriculum Council.

The following scenario reveals the inherent unfairness of this system when it used to derive a TER score for places in sought-after University courses.

Ben the Boss’s son, a Bad-Boy Bully Bludger who attends Peppermint Grove College, an elite boys schools in the Western Suburbs.

Ben is likely to be placed in learning groups with very capable boys who will work hard and produce wonderful work. Under Curriculum Council regulations, these boys are meant to tell the teacher of their individual input into each task. Will the boys risk dobbing on the bully?

Elizabeth, the English teacher’s daughter is a hard-working, conscientious student who attends North Swamp Senior High School in a low-socioeconomic suburb on the outskirts of town.

Elizabeth wants to work hard and achieve, but her task-based assessment marks are dragged down by her lazy, disinterested peers.

My questions are:

Should Levels Derived from these Collaborative Tasks be used to Calculate TER?

Is this fair? Is this valid?

The Curriculum Council proposes to use a school-by-school GAT to moderate the levels- will this not amplify the unfairness?

PROBLEMS WITH SYLLABUS-FREE EXAMS

Another problem which has emerged since the decision to implement syllabus-free OBE into Upper School is the ridiculous exam questions developed by the WA Curriculum Council for use in Tertiary Entrance Examinations.

Here is a sample exam question from the proposed Music Course of Study. This question is worth 25% of the paper.

MUSIC: STAFF NOTATION READERS SAMPLE EXAMINATION

Question 14

The following is an extract from Sculthorpe's book, *Sun Music*:

"If white Australia has few, if any, musical traditions that are intrinsically Australian, I am continually sustained by our history, geography and the dramatic character of the people. More sustenance would, perhaps, be a surfeit. Our very lack of a single, clear musical tradition simply makes Australia an exciting and challenging country for a composer."

(Sculthorpe, 1999)

According to Sculthorpe Australia's landscape, society and culture have had a profound influence on his music.

Discuss how influential you believe a composer's social and cultural environment is in shaping that composer's music. Using the musical works you have studied as a source, provide specific examples of where a composer's music has been influenced by the values, beliefs and traditions of their society and culture.

[20 marks]

Exam Marking Key

Outcome 3

Displays a high level of complexity and sophistication in construction of an argument including a strong understanding of the highly interconnected relationship between composers, their works and context. Conceptualises environment as all of the relevant contextual factors, including values, attitudes and beliefs. Clearly uses specific composers and relevant, detailed examples from at least two of their works to analyse and illustrate the two way connection between the composers' cultural environments and the musical works produced. Uses stylistically appropriate vocabulary.

Marks 18-20 Notional Level 8

Sample level 8 response, as marked by qualified CC marker:

Q.14

Composers are influenced by their social and cultural environment, and these factors shape the key features of their music. I am choosing Western Australia's greatest ever composer, Rolf Harris, as an example of these phenomena.

Rolf's original hit was the song "Sun-Arise", in which he used his original originality to imitate Aboriginal music. (Note: the prefix "ab" means 'without' - as in 'abstain', meaning without stains). By using a simple drone and pentatonic scale, along with repetitive rhythmic ostinatos, Rolf captured the boring, repetitive nature of life in Western Australia, where he grew up.

He cleverly uses the simplicity of the musical elements in a sophisticated way, combining them with simple, child-like lyrics and endless repetition to make a song which is a deeply meaningful and sophisticated anthem for all Australians. In using these deliberately simplified elements, Rolf reflects the general stupidity and lack of education of West Australians, as well as mentioning the kangaroo paw, their State flower.

Many of Rolf's other works prove that he was ahead of his time politically, socially, and environmentally. In the song "Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport", Rolf speaks out about animal cruelty, before public awareness on this issue became widespread. In "Jake the Peg", Rolf paints a picture of the social injustice faced by the disabled, and predicts their ultimate triumph over discrimination. In the song "The Court Of King Caractacus", Rolf warns of the danger of exponential population growth, and warns the world of the danger if they allow the opportunity to stop the population explosion "...just pass by".

We can see from these examples that great composers like Rolf do more than merely react to the values, beliefs and traditions of their culture and society.

Rolf's prophetic songs had a major influence on Australian and World political and social thought, making an economic contribution to the Australian economy as well. The Land Rights Act, Mabo, the RSPCA, the Equal Opportunity Act and the Kyoto agreement have all eventuated through his music.

Let's not forgot the wobbleboard, an instrument which Rolf invented, and sits alongside pavlova and the TV show "Neighbours" as significant contributions Australians have made to the World culture. In using the wobbleboard and the spoons, Rolf was a pioneer in the use of technology in presenting music ideas in Western Australia.

In closing, I think it is obvious that Rolf Harris is likely to remain Western Australia's greatest ever composer.

End of sample exam response

The disturbing feature of the WA OBE system is that according to the publicly available marking criterion, this joke response would have to receive full marks in the Year 12 Tertiary Entrance Music Exam.

Sadly, this exam question reflects another trend in being powerfully propelled forward by OBE.

Students are increasingly studying popular music that has very little musical substance, and at least half of what they are being taught and are being assessed on is the WORDS of popular songs. This is happening because of the ridiculous "general arts" outcomes, which are based on Drama. Music has been reduced to a background phenomena, which merely supports lyrics.

It's easier to "achieve" higher levels by keeping the musical elements at primary school level, and having lyrics that involve "higher order thinking".
Now a Music exam is 25% sociology essay writing.

Evidential is last year's sample exam response about "an event which changed music forever". The ridiculous sample response is 72% about elements other than music. It goes on about what Elvis was wearing, how he wriggled his hips, etc, and pays lip service to the musical elements, which are, in relation to any music worthy of serious study, of little consequence.

CONCLUSION

Please consider these problems with the WA OBE Curriculum Framework implementation before proceeding with any further Constructivist Framework development.

Please visit platowa.com to confirm the public opposition and abysmal track record of the Curriculum Framework implementation in WA.

If Frameworks are to be used, they must be fleshed out with sequential learning content and skills, and supported with established and appropriate pedagogical practices. Conventional assessment principles must be applied according to the established learning theories.

Australian children deserve better than an education based on empty Curriculum Frameworks.

Thank you for reading my submission.

Bruce Gillam

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