Word Watching:
The Presence and Absence of Discourse in the Negotiation of the Arts: Initial Advice Paper (Acara 2010)

Dr Joanna Barbousas
Australian Catholic University

Abstract

Current consultation processes and draft documents for the representation of 'The Arts: Initial Advice Paper (ACARA, 2010) have brought to the frontline debates about discipline knowledge, formation of 'practices', and normalised assumptions about 'the arts' in educational terms. Declarations and statements that have been declared and positioned as knowledge in documentation that support the formation of an Australian Curriculum are ways to trace the power formations masked by democratic rhetoric and collaborations. This paper reports on an ongoing investigation of the political agenda mapped through statements used to declare a particular kind of curriculum change. To understand the inclusion and exclusion of discourses in the proposed Australian Curriculum is to count and account for field presence.

Introduction

In Australian educational history there have been several failed attempts to propose 'national' curricula, 'national' testings and other 'national' initiatives in education with an understanding of minimising 'clutter' and maximising a standards-based framework — where consistency of knowledge is measured and collective structures focus on normalisation and achievement benchmarks. Although these failed 'national' initiatives did not gain traction, an increase of measurement and surveillance has amplified educational agendas. However, one needs to ask, why now? Why in Australia at this time have the focused agendas of 'national' education discourse held on? Why is a consensus approach to a 'big' curriculum agenda mobilised at high speed where standards benchmarks are favoured over autonomous and critical thinking practices? The formation of an 'audit culture' is what Michael Apple (2005) describes as the reconstruction of 'market economies' and 'market societies and cultures' (11). To understand the focus on structures of accountabilities, Apple (2005) argues that market discourses formulate experiences through rhetoric of transparency and good old-fashioned information transmission. However, an increase in auditing of the world we live in decreases the complexities life offers and reduces experiences to systemic constructs. In curriculum terms, the more you measure, the more you reduce to the mean, where content and professional practices become generic, with standard becoming the point of reference - not learning or autonomous practices. Consequently, the 'system' overrides the 'life-world', reducing experiences to inspected and examined commodities that can be surveyed to create targets. Interestingly, Australia is following at high speed to compete in the history of 'measurable results and central control' — that have been the conservative trajectories in Britain and the United States over the past decades (Apple 2005, p.12). Therefore, discourses of measurement and surveillance, along with common standards, frame the Australian Curriculum to function as a 'system that overrides the life-world' of practices and knowledge. The decision to collapse five distinct disciplines: Visual Arts, Dance, Drama, Music and Media in the framework of 'the arts' may seem arbitrary and ubiquitous, however the implications of this 'union' are a fundamental concern for Visual Arts education. Within the context of 'the audit' culture, it makes sense to have the formation of 'the arts' in the Australian Curriculum and the agenda of reduction continues to mobilise common practices. When examining the proposals and recommendations it is essential to scrutinize the words and statements used to describe practices and knowledge.

The Arts as 'complete' knowledge

In the proposals, the representation of 'the arts' is linked to a representation of practices set within assumptions about 'the arts' as similar, adjacent and perhaps related. However, the traditions, statements and discourses representative of each of the arts: Visual Arts, Dance, Drama, Music, Media are mobilised by practices that 'bring to life' the discourses that characterise discipline representation. It is beneficial to trace, inspect, expound but never dismiss the use of certain

words over others in curriculum construction, as it is both a social and political apparatus (Greene, 2004, Pinar, 2004). Although 'every word in the language has a history, and that history passes unnoticed in everyday use', it is imperative that critical examination is made of the *everyday* and the *normal* ways of being and understanding (Burnside 2006,p.3). It is problematic for the Visual Arts as a disciplinary practice to distinguish knowledge through 'complete' constructions and umbrella formations of 'the arts'. The paper is an example of the reduction to the mean; where general statements, universal truths and commonsense attitudes about 'the arts' are repeated rather than dismantled and made distinct. Such normalised intentions are inclusive of standards and simultaneously reductive in the approaches used to represent knowledge formations, leaving aside the specificities and particularities that allow for discipline content to mobilise authentic and significant curriculum developments.

Discourse and practice

There is a tendency in education to assume that discourse is 'all that stuff of theory' that can be perceived as untouchable and distant from practices of education – *praxis* wins hands down. However, discourse is not a passive and benign construct transmitting ideas, opinions and beliefs; rather, it is that which grounds experience and knowledge. Because of its *active* role, it is discourse that should be critically examined regularly and methodically, to keep track of manoeuvres evident in what seems to be 'in good faith' — a representation of the Australian Curriculum where 'the arts' operate to function in the rhetoric of democratic equality (Barbousas 2009a, 2009b). Current consultation processes and draft documents for the representation of 'the arts' in the Australian Curriculum have brought to the frontline debates about discipline knowledge, formation of 'practices', and normalised assumptions about 'the arts' in educational terms. These debates are neither new nor innovative; rather they come with the territory of any curriculum reform when complex ideas of knowledge and distinct practices are regulated through one construct — 'the arts'. Stephen Kemmis argues that situating *praxis* in practice is knowing the discourses that support not only the intentions of an individual – thus individual actions – 'but rather to show that they are also shaped and conditioned by arrangements, circumstances and conditions

beyond each person as an individual agent or actor' (2000, p1). Words, statements, discourses, mobilised through language formations, are conditions in which the framing of curriculum proposals are able to function and dysfunction the 'saying', 'doings' and 'relatings' in Visual Arts practices (Kemmis, 2007, 2010).

Discourse representation is a reminder of what knowledge is mobilised to do and how that knowledge forms into practices that are ritualistic, collective and transformative. Often these interactions and exchanges between knowledge and practice are hidden or buried under histories' accounts of human behaviour formulated as social practice (Barbousas, 2009a) . Michel Foucault accounts for the normalisation of practice in this statement: "People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does" (Foucault in Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1984,p187). Foucault states,

I would like to show that a discourse is not a slender surface of contact, or configuration, between a reality and a language...in analysing discourses themselves, one sees the loosening of the embrace, apparently so tight, of words and things, and the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice. These rules define not the dumb existence of a reality, nor the canonical use of a vocabulary, but the ordering of objects (Foucault, 1972,p.49)

Additionally, this 'ordering' is often hidden and opaque, immersed in the system without realisation, where the docility of the body is amplified in silence (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1984). Therefore discourse is the pronouncement of language supported and authorised by a given field, which has been replicated, announced and denounced as knowledge through time (Barbousas, 2009 b). In the case of the representation of Visual Arts Education in *The Arts Initial Advice Paper*, knowledge shows little resemblance to current practices and research initiatives in Visual Arts education. Emphasis is given to universal statements, with the intention to propose democratic utilitarian words such as *generating*, *realising*, *responding*, as a way to normalise distinct discipline knowledge for the greater good of 'interdisciplinary' — a celebration of ubiquity and access through the rhetoric of democratic education and the lowest common denominator is given precedence over complex ideas and practices.

Dismissing discourse as a strategy for the new

One of the recommendations proposed in the Melbourne Declaration and supported by ACARA during various versions of the consultation process was that 'the arts' would be represented as the 'Performing' and 'Visual' arts. These two distinctive words have great implications for Visual Arts education and the representation of authentic knowledge and practices in the field. With the deliberate move towards an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary investigation of knowledge in various state curricula, it is a beneficial representation if the 'Visual Arts' as statement and discourse is clearly made distinct. Curriculum and knowledge representation in school subjects have complex structural constraints to adhere to. If all 'that is visual' is taken up and formalised as practice in other subject areas like English, distinctive knowledge that is embedded in the practices of the Visual Arts will be 'seen to be applicable and deliverable in other areas'. To take a word, statement, and discourse away from distinctive power structures in the Australian Curriculum is not a value neutral act. Discourse omissions affect practices and institutional support. It has been accounted on several occasions that in developing the paper, key writers took up the practice of strategically disregarding distinctive statements and terms from current and past curriculum documents from all Australian states, with the intention of proposing a *new* way of conceptualising curriculum — or more succinctly, a *new* way of conceptualising normalisation.

A general all 'inclusive' proposition favouring the formation of interdisciplinary practices has field representation at the cost of losing subject distinction. The claims made in the paper propose that words such as *Generating*, *Realising* and *Responding* are specific to all art forms and have with them taxonomic agendas of cognitive processes of learning. Similarly, the discourse of taxonomy is further emphasised in the sequential ordering of learning when 'first we apprehend' then we 'comprehend' to develop meaning of the world. These sequential hierarchical claims about learning and meaning development lack research presence. These words are proposed as the organisers of the domains and field knowledge. However the verbs in the centre of this organisation: *Generating*, *Realising* and *Responding*, contradict the complex theoretical configurations represented in Visual Arts education research and practice.

The who's who of the what's what: The myth of consultation

The consultation processes that seem to be advocated and badged by ACARA as "engaging with the field" are synonymously linked to poetic statements of inclusion and collaboration, with a select group at the foreground. The interest here is not whether one person is included or excluded, rather who is represented as having significant, effective and relevant exposure to the complexities of curriculum design in 'the arts' education. There is a significant representation of discipline experts from within the Visual Arts, Dance, Drama, Music and Media, however the representation of experts within the practice of education in these domains are not as equally represented. Therefore discipline knowledge is favoured over education application and curriculum understanding, which invariably skews the application of discipline knowledge in the learning context. Consultation is an interesting word, as it encompasses all manner of practices — both inclusive and exclusive with particular agendas at play. The consultation processes that are ritualistically announced, both in written and spoken word, by ACARA are another way, through complex iterations, to manage and manicure the proposed outcome.

Conclusion

It is the view of the author that word formations and discourse considerations in the proposed Australian Curriculum for 'the arts' speak volumes about power configurations and agenda playing, through the rhetoric of consensus. To dismiss the inclusion or exclusion of terms, or perhaps the collapsing and immersion of other words and statements is to not understand the importance of discourse in curriculum construction. With the increased agenda of 'the visual' as knowledge, statement and practice in the wider curriculum, Visual Arts education has a lot to lose if the word 'visual' is collapsed under the umbrella of 'the arts' — leaving no distinction for 'visual' to function as a distinct term of practice. With this collapse, comes the integration of 'visual' in other subjects and with it comes curriculum immersion and integration, which will see the loss of 'visual' as a discourse in Visual Arts Education. Curriculum is discourse, formulated by practices and language that mobilise these conditions - to change a word is to rearrange the formation of practice. In the words of Paul Keating: "When you change the government, you change the country" (1996, p1) Although not as ubiquitous and dramatic,

curriculum change carries social implications which can be both transformative and destructive.

References

Apple, W.M. (2005). Education, markets and the audit culture. *Critical Quarterly*. 47(1-2) (pp. 11-29).

Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2010). *The Arts: Initial AdvicePaper*, unpublished consultation paper

Barbousas, J. (2009a). The Formation of Visual as Concept and Practice in Art Education: Towards an understanding of disciplinarity. *Australian Art Education*. 32 (Special Edition).

Barbousas, J. (2009b). The Visual Education Movement: The emergence of visual technology in education. *The International Learning Journal*. 16 (10). (pp. 169-180).

Burnside, J. (2006). *Word Watching: Field notes from an amateur philologist*. Melbourne: Scribe.

Dreyfus, H. & Rabinow, P. (1984) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984.

Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Pantheon Books.

Greene, M. (2004). 'Curriculum and Consciousness'. In *The Curriculum Studies Reader* (2nd Edition). David J. Flinders & Stephen J. Thorton (Eds). (pp. 135-148). New York & London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Keating, P. (1996, March 2). Paul Keating's concession speech. *Australian Politics.com.* Retrieved November 1, 2010, from. http://australianpolitics.com/elections/1996/96-03-02keating-concession.shtml

Kemmis, S., & Grootenboer. P. (2007). *Situating praxis in practice.* In Stephen Kemmis and Tracey J. Smith (Eds.) *Enabling praxis: Challenges for education.* Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Kemmis, S. (2010). 'Research for praxis: knowing doing'. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*. 18(1). (pp. 9-27).

Pinar, F. W. (2004). 'The Reconceptualization of Curriculum Studies'. In *The Curriculum Studies Reader* (2nd Edition). David J. Flinders & Stephen J. Thorton (Eds). (pp. 149-158). New York & London: RoutledgeFalmer.

7

World Watching: The Presence and Absence of Discourse in the Negotiation of the Arts: Initial Advice Paper
Dr Joanna Barbousas

ESL vocabulary quiz for negotiations in English. Check that you have learned the terms and words used in negotiating in English. Business English for English learners. Negotiation Vocabulary Quiz. This quiz will test your understanding of what you learned on the negotiation vocabulary page. 1. The parties came to _ after five hours of negotiating. hostility the bottom-line a consensus. a) hostility b) the bottom-line c) a consensus. 2. It was _ decision to settle our differences out of court. a flexible a mutual an unrealistic. a) a flexible b) a mutual c) an unrealistic. Describing discourse as social practice implies a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s), which frame it: The discursive event is shaped by them, but it also shapes them. That is, discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned â€" it constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities of and relationships between people and groups of people. It is constitutive both in the sense that it helps to sustain and reproduce the social status quo, and in the sense that it contribut Initial Scottish proposals in the negotiation over the Union suggested a devolved Parliament be retained in Scotland, but this was not accepted by the English negotiators. The notification of withdrawal by a member state starts a negotiation period that is limited to two years, unless extended with the consent of all EU member states. Show More Sentences. In 2010, after 14 years of negotiation, Laponiatjuottjudus, an association with Sami majority control, will govern the UNESCO World Heritage Site Laponia. After years of negotiation, three Great Powers, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France, decided to intervene in the conflict and each nation sent a navy to Greece.