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

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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 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).

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 sittinguate *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 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.
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


A Discourse on the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences (1750), also known as Discourse on the Sciences and Arts (French: Discours sur les sciences et les arts) and commonly referred to as The First Discourse, is an essay by Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau which argued that the arts and sciences corrupt human morality. It was Rousseau's first successful published philosophical work, and it was the first expression of his influential views about nature vs. society, to which he would