

Title: ***What is the place of civics education in Australia's democracy and what are we doing about it?***

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**Introduction:**

I'd like to thank Dr Donna Weeks for welcoming me.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I understand that the question I have been invited to address - ***What is the place of civics education in Australia's democracy and what are we doing about it?*** has been prompted by widespread concern as to why such a poor understanding of Australian political institutions is apparent in job entrants in public service and political arenas.

I could provide a short answer to this question. The applicants might not have learnt much at school, and if they did not study political science or government subjects in their undergraduate degree, they might not have engaged with notions of civics and citizenship at university either. Moreover, I contend that this lack of civic knowledge is widespread in the Australian community.

Put simply, civics education – and its necessary counterpart, citizenship education, has had an image problem in schools. Sadly, many teachers in the past have not seen Civics and Citizenship Education as important. Moreover, many of these teachers also lacked civics knowledge and understanding in their own education. As a consequence of this, teachers have been reluctant to teach it. This of course, meant that students in schools either did not learn much about civics and/or citizenship, or did not learn anything at all! It might be argued that when student leave school this 'deficit' of civic knowledge often translates into a lack of engagement with the idea of democratic government, and sadly, how Australian democracy works. And, if this argument is plausible, it follows that many Australians are simply unprepared for citizenship and engagement in civic life.

That said, I would also like to stress that there have been some wonderful initiatives that have challenged this disinterest, namely the Discovering Democracy Project, and I will refer briefly to the achievements under it this evening. I will finish on a positive note as under the new national curriculum – the *Australian Curriculum* - Civics and Citizenship Education has been designated a place in its own right as one of the *Humanities and social sciences* and in doing so joins the other subjects of – history, geography, business and economics.

CCE is scheduled for implementation in the Phase Three suite of subjects for all students in Years 3-8. And it is offered as an elective in Years 9 and 10. I think this is exciting and provides an opportunity to reignite interest and passion in the teaching of CCE in this country. More of this later.

I'd like to do 4 things in the allocated time for my address and hopefully there will be opportunities to further some of the points I make in the question and answer segment that follows.

First, I will explain briefly how CCE is defined for schooling in Australia. Second, I will place myself in the context; Third, I will provide a brief historical context for CCE, and fourth – I will conclude on a positive note with reference to the new CCE Curriculum in the national curriculum. I am a member of the National Advisory Group for this curriculum which we hope will be finalised by the end of the year for implementation from 2014.

## **First, what is Civics and Citizenship?**

The short answer is that **Civics relates to *civic knowledge*** and **Citizenship is *dispositional*** (attitudes, values, dispositions and skills). ***Interpretation lies at the heart of Civics and Citizenship Education.***

**Civics** is the more defined of the two. It is the study of Australian democracy, its history, traditions, structures and processes; our democratic culture ... the ways Australian society is managed, by whom and to what end. Even these simple definitions indicate contested areas which will be encountered in the teaching and learning of Civics. And I might add that some teachers feel very uncomfortable about dealing with contested issues, hence they avoid them in the classroom.

**Citizenship** is the development of the skills, attitudes, beliefs and values that will predispose students to participate, to become and remain engaged and involved in that society/culture/democracy.

A rich and complex set of understandings, based on civics knowledge and attitudes or values, **plus** the opportunity to experience, to practise civic competencies, is required for effective citizenship education.

***Without civic knowledge and a disposition to engage, a person cannot effectively practise citizenship.***

***As Aristotle reminded us citizens are 'all who share in the civic life of ruling and being ruled in turn ... [and] must possess the knowledge and capacity requisite for ruling as well as for being ruled'.***

Furthermore, I contend that students will need to experience a problematising approach in their learning of Civics and Citizenship simply because much of Civics and Citizenship is problematic and contested by nature. Teachers need to model and manage an open classroom environment. Students need to learn how to manage difference of opinion, and develop attitudes and skills in regards to difference and contestation in a civil and respectful way. So it is not easy to teach Civics and Citizenship Education in schools – but of course – it is incredibly rewarding. This leads me to my second point.

**Second, I will now position myself in this context as I taught Civics and Citizenship in schools since the first year of my appointment in 1977 in a state high schools situated in a low socio-economic context where long term intergenerational unemployment was the norm.**

I commenced my first year of teaching in a disadvantaged Queensland state high school with two classes of year 9 Civics and Citizenship Education and three other subjects. I had to teach in a 'demountable' or temporary classroom that was run down, and extremely hot in summer. My CCE students were 'streamed' by the school administration team as not being 'good enough' or academically able to study history or geography. As a beginning teacher I was totally unprepared for dealing with the learning needs of these students, many of whom were from third generation unemployed family backgrounds. I stumbled and fumbled my way through some very unsuccessful lessons but gradually, as I grew to know these students, I was able to cater my teaching to meet their needs. Soon I was humbled by how much these students learnt when it was done in a manner that made the materials accessible to them. And they wanted to learn. Towards the end of that first year I'd learned a lot. I became aware that most of my colleagues thought that teaching CCE was

considered to be the 'sort straw'; or the worst class to teach in the timetable. Usually students streamed into CCE were thought to be 'unteachable' – dubbed – 'teaching the dummies' – hence CCE was given to new recruits like me. However, I knew that these students were not dummies – they just had different learning needs and these had to be attended to – so they could respond and grow – and grow they did!

I was called up to the Principal's office at the end of that first year to explain the number of A's and B's on the report cards for both my year CCE classes. I was terrified and had no idea what it was about. In brief, the Principal had refused to sign my reports and demanded to know how I'd arrived at these results. I made an appointment to see him the next day with samples of marked student work and my records of marks. I was instructed to leave the materials with him and the following week was called up to collect them. At this meeting, the Principal told me that he'd signed the reports, noted that it was pleasing to see that I was working hard and as a reward I could look forward to teaching some 'real subjects' like history in the following year. When I explained that I was happy to continue with CCE he was quite surprised, almost dismissive, and concluded the meeting. I recall feeling very confused about the subtext of the meeting with the Principal. He made no mention of the students and their work at all. Was he happy with what I'd done? I'll never know – but as no one else wanted to take CCE – I was allocated it again to teach. In fact, I taught CCE for the 6 years I was at that school. I don't know how representative my experience was of other teachers of my era – but I think I can generalise to say that teachers were not usually keen to take CCE when they could teach history or geography instead.

### **Third, what has been the position of CCE in Australia and in Queensland?**

CCE has, over time and in various ways, been recognized as a significant aspect of Australian education. In the 1890s and early 1900s it was linked to history and moral training. By the 1930s and 1940s it had developed into an explicit curriculum area as a component of social studies. Since the late 1980s, there has been a considerable emphasis on the development of CCE curriculum and policy in Australia, at the national and state levels. This was in response initially, to a perceived 'civic deficit' amongst young Australians, and government concern at the level of public knowledge about, and commitment to, Australian political institutions. Three federal government inquiries were conducted (Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1989, 1991; Civics Expert Group, 1994). Subsequent governments agreed, with varied emphases and commitments, that all students are entitled to develop the knowledge, skills and capacities to be active and informed citizens, capable of participating in their own communities, the nation and the wider world. The strongest commitment in terms of policy and funding for resources and professional learning to date was in the period from 1997 to 2004, when the Howard government developed the national *Discovering Democracy project* (Curriculum Corporation, 1997). David Kemp was the Minister for Education at the time.

The first stage of the *Discovering Democracy Program* involved the development of resources which incorporated a paradigm focused on formal Australian governance institutions and civic knowledge. The second stage focused on teacher professional development strategies (PD) which schools could adopt, and provided scope for expanding student CCE knowledge, understanding and dispositions. This was backed by the development of state-based curriculum development during both stages, but

the *Discovering Democracy project* **was not mandated for implementation in schools**, since the implementation of education policies rests with State and Territory governments. Despite the fact that many schools did not participate in the program, there is some evidence to suggest that the available funding generated a range of CC programs across Australia. The *Evaluation of the Discovering Democracy Program* (Erebus Consulting Group, 1999) found that the successful implementation of the program was highly variable in schools.

Perhaps this variability can also be linked to the fact that there was no formal subject in Years 1-12 across Australia (except for the non-compulsory Citizenship Education subject for Years 9-10 in Queensland, which I taught for six years as a beginning teacher and that ended some 20 years ago). Moreover, as I've referred to earlier, when civics was included in the curriculum as earlier effort for a national curriculum from 1993 though designated Key Learning Areas such as SOSE, there were very few teachers who had the background to teach it. And this lack of teacher knowledge remains a significant issue today.

Let me return to the *Discovering Democracy Program* project for when the funding for it concluded, the emphasis shifted when Minister for Education, Science and Training Hon Brendan Nelson focused on the teaching of values in Australian schools. The *Values Education Study: Final Report* (Curriculum Corporation, 2003) noted three different domains of values education such as 'articulating values in the school's mission/ethos; developing student civic and social skills and building resilience; and incorporating values into teaching programs across the key learning areas' (Curriculum Corporation, 2003, p.11).

This period was something of a hiatus for CCE, as the funding for it concluded and the Howard government shifted its approach to securing 'national education' in the push for a national history curriculum as part of its agenda. After the Howard government's defeat in the Federal election in 2007, the newly elected Labor Rudd Government, continued the push for a national approach to curriculum development and extended this beyond the discipline of history.

So, whilst the development of a national curriculum for Australia, focused initially on the development of four discipline areas: Maths, Science, History and English. Subsequently, the national development of the *Civics and Citizenship* curriculum, under the newly named and constituted Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) Board commenced in October 2010, and is to be completed by the end of 2013.

**Fourth, let me now turn to CCE in the Australian Curriculum. I am a member of the National Advisory Panel Group** that is advising the writers of the new CCE Curriculum and the public consultation for the current version has just concluded. In broad terms – the feedback from the submissions and from the trail schools is very positive. The finer detail of this feedback is continuing, but I am encouraged by that fact that so many of the respondents stressed how important CCE is for young Australians.

**How is CCE configured in this document?** In the *Draft Years 3–10 Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship* – May 2013, the Rationale states:

Through the study of the Civics and Citizenship curriculum students will learn about Australia's political and legal systems and effective participatory citizenship in contemporary Australian society. They will develop knowledge, understanding, skills, values and dispositions to become beneficiaries

of and contributors to society. The curriculum will enable students to be active and informed citizens in local, national, regional and global contexts. The curriculum content integrates the study of 'civics' with the study of 'citizenship'.

The Civics and Citizenship curriculum aims to develop students' knowledge and understanding of Australia's representative democracy and the key institutions, processes, and roles people play in Australia's legal and political systems at local, state/territory, national and international levels. Emphasis is placed on Australia's federal system of government based on liberal democratic values such as freedom, equality and rule of law; how the people, as citizens, choose their governments; and how the system safeguards democracy by vesting people with civic rights and responsibilities. The curriculum explores how laws and the legal system protect people's rights and how individuals and groups can influence civic life.

The organising ideas are:

Government and Democracy; Laws and Citizens and Citizenship, diversity and identity.

### **The announcement of the election:**

The CCE won't be signed off when the federal election is held on 7 September. The anticipated timelines indicates that it will be ready by the end of the year. I am hopeful that this new curriculum will be embraced by teachers. However as only 20 hours of timetable school time is recommended – it will be challenging for teachers to implement CCE effectively. In sum, CCE deserves more than 20 hours. Also – it is only compulsory for students in years 3 to 8 at school and can be offered as an elective to students in years 9 and 10, but only if schools choose to do so. My view is that CCE should be compulsory to year 10. In fact, the most recent statement on national goals for schooling in Australia, the *Melbourne Declaration* (MCEETYA 2008: 8) made clear in Goal 2 that all young Australians need to become 'become active and informed citizens'. Students in year 9 and 10 need to be learn about the multiple forms of active and engaged citizenship from local to global contexts.

### **Conclusion**

Given that the Australasian Study of Parliament Group is a non-partisan body with a charter to bring together parliamentarians, academics and senior members of the media to foster research, understanding and debate about our parliamentary system of democracy, I would encourage members to push for a research project to investigate how the new CCE Curriculum is being implemented in schools. CCE is too important to be ignored.

Thank you and over to questions.

Member of the Social Educators Association of Queensland.

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