CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

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One of the axioms of curriculum design is that a curriculum is a selection of what is held to be most worthwhile in a culture, its core values and beliefs, its traditions of reliable knowledge, its arts and artefacts. There are two deep paradoxes at the heart of these propositions that curriculum designers and teachers need to take note of.

Having recently arrived from England, I can tell of the debate there concerning the introduction of the National Curriculum. No longer a *cultural* core, and oddly shy of the values crisis that Western societies need to address, the UK National Curriculum downgrades the Arts, treating, for example, Drama as an adjunct of English or a pedagogical ploy in the teaching of other subjects; it also stops History sufficiently short of contemporary items to marginalise current affairs. It seems a long time since Lawrence Stenhouse was proposing, in his *Humanities Curriculum Project,* an argumentative approach to controversial divisive topics, holding as he did that "vernacular humanism" was only possible if civic issues could be debated in the teeth of cultural uncertainty. For at the heart of Stenhouse's cultural analysis stood issues rather than certainties. One paradox is that for post-industrial, fragmented, pluralistic cultures, the quest for core elements that can be mandated into the curriculum is more difficult than the theory allows. A second paradox is that knowledge, values and beliefs (the stuff of which any curriculum is constructed) are all caught in a pull, or cross-fire, between the idea of the universal truth and the idea of local knowledge. The tension has seemed particularly important to me since coming to the South Pacific.

If possible, one always likes to venture into an area difficult to understand with an inspirational text, the sound advice of a reliable friend. My personal talisman for approaching this particular dilemma is a delightful book by the social anthropologist Clifford Geertz (if such a fecund mind can be classified so crudely in the teeth of his own account that contemporary intellectual life is characterised by blurred genres) aptly called *Local Knowledge.* In it Geertz handles the familiar dilemma of the nature of any understanding that crosses cultures, or times. How is it that the imaginative understandings, particularly the art forms, of different cultures can be so localised, so irredeemably situational in the cultural meanings constructed around them, yet so open to our intuitive grasp? The possibility exists, in Geertz' memorable phrase, for something to be "found in translation" - an expression neatly playing with the more usual but more pessimistic adage "lost in translation". Part of this is in the capacity of language and other symbolic forms to offer graspable cognitive and evaluative maps, giving us cautious access to other worlds. We do not suppose the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins inaccessible to those not steeped in Jesuit scholasticism or aesthetic ascetisism.

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Some of the values we hold and perpetuate through our curriculum we hold to be near universal, even if at times honoured more in the breach than the performance, like the value of courtesy in discussion, religious tolerance, a proper doctrine of civil rights, the centrality of enquiry in the pursuit of truth, and respect for the traditions in which we have been nurtured. Other values represent the views of particular groups wishing to extend their mandate. One question is whether Western, first-world models (although appearing to represent hard currency in the intellectual exchange mechanisms) ought to exercise

hegemonic supremacy in situations where they don't fit.[1] The most obvious example is the rich art and craft traditions of the region, which the University of the South Pacific should assist in validating by developing a locally-vibrant Expressive Arts programme. But the wider question still persists; it is one put insistently by my colleague Dr. Tupeni Baba; what is particularistic about education in our small island states?[2]

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Since coming to USP I have heard the "local" argument in meetings, sometimes phrased obliquely as a generalisation ("It's a cultural thing"). Sometimes they mean that it is no good expecting students to be less passive, less pliant, more willing to challenge the (always tenuous) authority of the teacher; it is pointless, I am also told, to expect satellite tutorials to be genuinely interactive. In Fiji teachers are called "master", respectfully, in the street. Yet my version of Stenhouse's "vernacular humanism" is to place everything, ultimately, before the appeal court of human judgement. Whether we internalise the (often valuable) ideas of others, or develop our own, education insists on the presence of a personal signature. Jerome Bruner, author of that most internationally-travelled of all curricula *Man: a Course of Study* once famously argued that the greatest joy a teacher can experience is when a pupil, tutored in persistence and the recognition of anamolies, actually reaches a point where he or she is able to ask a question that the teacher can't answer. May we all have more of that exquisite pleasure, masters, in the days to come, while we are still sinners here on Atoll Earth.

REFERENCES

1. See Thaman, Konai 'Islands in between : Some social studies curriculum issues for Pacific Island Countries' in D.C. Wilson *et al* (Eds) *Issues of Educational Policy, Curriculum and Practice* 1990. Dr Thaman also writes persuasively on the same theme in this volume (see P.3).

2. See ED352 *Contemporary Issues in Education : Education in Small Island States.* USP Extension Services 1990.