

African Studies Conference

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TEACHING ABOUT AFRICA IN SCHOOLS

Problems in Teaching about Other Cultures in Australian Schools

Anthony P. Haydon

A recent - and still very ill-defined - move towards the introduction of a multicultural approach to education in Australian schools has given rise to a number of crucial questions about the appropriateness and effectiveness of such an approach.

1. Why teach about other cultures at all?

Unless the decision to introduce materials about other cultures is merely a cynical response to the sudden availability of funds for the purpose, the reasons for such a move may include

- a desire to 'flesh out' conventional school subjects like history and geography into a generalist social studies, with or without a strong contemporary focus
- a genuine wish to contribute to current trends towards guided social change ('a multicultural Australia')
- an expression of a particular teacher's personal experience or enthusiasm
- a response to the enthusiasm of others, such as proselytising organisations (including the sponsors of this conference)
- the exploitation of well-presented teaching materials which become available
- a response to the express wishes of parents or students
- a conscious step towards development of a program of values education, perhaps as a move away from the teaching of values under such rubrics as religious studies.

2. What other cultures should we teach about?

Unless the decision to include study of other cultures has determined the choice (for example, where a teacher with personal experience of a particular culture spearheads the curricular change), the choice of cultures to be studied will generally follow the decision in principle to teach about 'other cultures'. The link between motive (why?) and subject matter (which?) will be apparent:

- migrants in Australia: the choice of ethnic groups (Greeks, Italians, Turkish, Vietnamese, etc.) will generally reflect either a response to the 'multicultural Australia' campaign (and funding) or will be a response to the express wish of migrant parents.
- Aborigines: again, the 'multicultural Australia' motive may have influenced the choice, though in many cases the desire to study the black/white form of racism without resort to overseas examples will have been influential in the choice. Curriculum materials development in this area present particular problems (e.g. the 'People of the Western Desert' debate).
- South East Asia: apart from its link with the 'Australia's Near North' campaign of the 'sixties, the prevalence of South East Asian studies in Australian schools owes much to the existence of material attractive to teachers and to the efforts of an energetic subject association.

- 'Down on the Old Tigris and Euphrates' or 'From Mesopotamia to Mexico'. Either because of the dominance of the older generation of history teachers, or because of a (related) desire to distance the study of other cultures in time and space ('better to study the Nile civilisations than to discuss Noonkanbah'), some schools have preferred to confine the curriculum on other cultures to conventional treatments of the birth of civilisations. In a few cases, the West African states may merit a mention, but for the most part such courses seem to continue on the well-trodden path from 'The Land between the Rivers' via the Nile Valley to the Aztecs and Incas.

- primitive cultures: often as an outgrowth of aboriginal studies, some social studies programs (perhaps more often in primary than in secondary schools) include components on the technologically less advanced. The influence of Man: A Course of Study (MACOS) in turning teachers towards the possibilities of such curricular innovations has been substantial. African studies, insofar as they have made any inroads in schools, seem to be largely confined to this thematic approach. The exceptions seem to be mainly studies of South African racism. Close examination of pre-colonial Africa (except via case studies phrased in the anthropological present tense) appears to be very sparse.

3. What approaches can we adopt to the teaching of other cultures?
What particular problems may these approaches present in Australian classrooms?

Without much question, the largest obstacle to the teaching of other cultures in Australian schools is the scarcity of suitable materials developed or adapted for use in this country. The ethnic studies components in the Social Education Materials Project (SEMP) have virtues as models for further materials development but they suffer, among other things, from inadequate attention to the language levels of the students for whose use they were intended. Very thorough school-based trialling - preceded by close collaboration between experts in content, curriculum development and language levels - seems to be indispensable if moves to develop African studies materials are to bear fruit.

Just as motive tends to include the choice of content in teaching about other cultures, so the combination of motive and content choice seem to determine the approach taken by teachers. At the risk of caricature, I characterise the extremes I have observed with the terms 'the exotic approach' and 'the UNESCO approach'.

- the exotic approach is encouraged where the teacher, perhaps rather ignorant of the other culture he wishes to present, has got his or her hands on some artefacts. Especially if these artefacts are the product of primitive technology, the temptation to patronise is apparently almost irresistible. One simple but effective way of avoiding this is to ask a class to try and make, for example, a stone axe or a clay cooking pot, using the tools and techniques of the culture under study.

- the UNESCO approach. Whereas the exotic approach concentrates by definition on cultural differences, the UNESCO approach hunts for and finds similarities between cultures, then presenting the list of these as proof of man's essential brotherhood. As well as begging the essential question of 'other culture' studies (i.e. why are cultures distinctive?) the UNESCO approach lends itself to a rather too obvious parodying which is not lost on the students whose tolerance it is designed to enhance.

4. The Study of Africa in Schools

The choice of cultures to be studied is far from unimportant; nor is the motive for that choice to be ignored. But the main issue is not the ground which is to be trodden but the destination at which we are hoping to arrive. Mere acquaintance with other cultures is of little value if it leads to no understanding of them, with all their differences from and similarities to our own. Those who have tried to teach about Italian to a class dominated by

Anglo-Australian will know the dangers of exacerbating rather than reducing prejudice. Equally, children of migrant parents may quite directly resist the study of a culture which daily experience tells them is at a disadvantage; assimilationist ambitions do not vanish at the stroke of a ministerial pen or the coining of slogans such as 'A Multicultural Australia'.

These are problems, not prohibitions. A program to encourage teaching about Africa in schools will have a better chance of success, I would estimate, if those who launch it are aware of some incipient resistance among teachers to airy and blithe enthusiasm as a basis for curricular innovation. They will expect to have clear answers to two questions: why should we teach about Africa? what materials have you developed or adapted to make teaching about Africa worthwhile and effective?

