

The K–8 Arts Education Curriculum: Views from the inside

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This is a report on issues raised at a BCTF Professional Issues Seminar on May 28, 2014. The video recording of the seminar can be watched at <http://bit.ly/1tLBMW8>.

The new K–8 Arts Education curriculum has some positive features in its draft form, but also a number of ways things could go sideways.

This is the overall message at a BCTF Professional Issues Seminar on the Arts Education curriculum, as seen by Sharon Richards and Heather Lytle. Richards was a member of the writing team for the Arts Education curriculum. Lytle is an executive member of the Association of BC Drama Educators. The seminar was chaired by BCTF-executive member, Joanna Larson.

The Arts Education curriculum committee consisted of members appointed by the BCTF, as well as an administrator, a teacher from the independent schools, and a Ministry staff person. This seminar on the arts is one of a series of BCTF seminars aimed at generating professional discussion of the Ministry curriculum process and content.

Integrated or separate Arts curriculum in K–8?

One clearly-positive development in the current process, according to seminar participants, is that Arts Education is being addressed in the initial round of curriculum development. Too many times in the past it has been left to the last and marginalized.

At the initial stage of development, only the K–8 curriculum draft has been posted on the Ministry website for reaction from teachers. This proposed curriculum has four forms of artistic expression incorporated into a single curriculum—Drama, Dance, Music, and Visual Arts.

In the current elementary Arts Education curriculum, these four artistic forms of expression each have a separate curriculum.

The panelists identified some of the issues that arise from this shift. An elementary teacher could choose only one of the four, feeling that since they are all within the one curriculum area, it is okay to address just the one she/he is most comfortable with and not address the others.

Given the limitations on staffing in the school system, it is less and less likely that an elementary school will have a teacher specialist in any of the arts. Having arts specialists in a school makes a positive contribution to effective arts education, and their loss is being felt.

A written contribution from the BC Dance Educators' Association (a BCTF Provincial Specialist Association—PSA) expressed the concern that Dance tends to get marginalized even now, when it has a separate curriculum. The danger is that Dance will lose further ground.

Despite these considerations, the panelists felt that fluid boundaries can have positive elements. Further, blurring lines with other subject areas can make for a rich learning situation, with curriculum “big ideas” being the link across subjects.

The focus on “artistic habits of mind” in the curriculum is a positive aspect of the draft curriculum from the perspective of Jill Sparrow-Ng from the BC Music Educators' Association, as long as it leads to “deep understanding of a discipline from practice over time.”

The BCMEA have stated that they do not support the four artistic expressions being incorporated into a single curriculum.

Unanswered questions about Grades 8 to 12—Separate curricula?

Different arts appeal to students with different characteristics. Different arts have significant differences in discipline and skills, particularly once you get past the superficial. To adopt a single secondary curriculum that covers the four arts does not make sense—this was the view firmly expressed by the panelists.

Sharon Richards, in her role as a member of the Ministry curriculum committee for Arts Education, prepared a draft Grade 8 curriculum, which was not posted by the Ministry. It is available on the Drama PSA website at <http://bcata.ca/>, located under the “Publications” tab. Her draft was written based on the assumption that the structure in Grade 8 would be linked to separate curricula for the four arts in Grades 9–12.

However, decisions about the secondary program have not been announced. The government is saying that it intends to “re-engineer” the schools to fit with the needs of employers. Also, it has held-up making curricular decisions until the graduation requirements have been defined. Once that has happened, all the curriculum for the earlier grades may need to be “re-engineered” as well, to fit with the Graduation Program. Also undetermined is whether Grade 10 will be in the grad program or linked to Grades 8 and 9.

Aboriginal content across the curriculum

One objective in the new curriculum is the inclusion of Aboriginal content across the curriculum. This is a commitment that the government has made to the First Nations Education Steering Committee, and is supported by the BCTF.

Each of the curriculum committees had an Aboriginal teacher member, recommended by the BCTF, who was asked to explain First People’s principles of learning and provide feedback from that perspective. An example of how to incorporate this is to have a focus on care for the environment that crosses curriculum boundaries.

Even with resources in the curriculum, barriers to inclusion of First People’s principles and content exist. Teachers who want to be inclusive have a couple of impediments, Sharon Richards said. One is concerns about making a mistake—not having enough knowledge and not understanding the protocols, and thus having a fear of offending. Another limitation, of course, is not having easy access to the necessary learning resources that are focused on the communities of the students.

Something new—The 3D curriculum

The Ministry plan is to create a “3D” curriculum. By this they seem to mean a curriculum that is not a document, but a website that links the big ideas, with a range of objectives that help students understand the big ideas, as well as curriculum, assessment, and teaching and learning resources that help the student and teacher grapple with the ideas and develop competencies.

This is something different. If it works, it could allow for greater flexibility for both teachers and students. It could encourage integration across boundaries, whether in the arts or with many other subject areas. It could build on networking as a way of working. It could be a tool that does encourage something that might legitimately be called “21st Century learning.”

What are the conditions to make a 3D curriculum a success?

As the panelists said, the education climate is key. Teachers will only be ready and willing to leave comfortable ground if there is trust. Teachers who feel threatened and insecure won’t undertake tasks that are seen as potentially dangerous and threatening.

Understanding the new 3D concept is also essential. Most of us think of curriculum change in the way we have experienced it: a committee works for a period of time and produces a new curriculum and a schedule for change. There may be some consultation before it is finalized, but probably little change. Textbook publishers create textbooks—or “repurpose” some from another jurisdiction. There is some in-service—maybe. And we wait for another two decades before another major change comes along.

The 3D curriculum breaks many of those expectations. The entire curriculum, not one subject area, is being (re)developed at one time. The process is more open—committee members are encouraged to share with colleagues, and the drafts are put on the Ministry website for feedback over a one-year period.

The 3D curriculum is a process, not a fixed document. It should evolve as teachers and students use the curriculum and develop their own additions, directions, and resources.

What could possibly go wrong with this creative concept?

Lack of trust by teachers is a key problem to be overcome—based on recent experience with government— if teachers are going buy in to this approach.

The 3D concept has not been clearly explained to those who will need to understand how it is different. Participants in the curriculum committees are probably among the few in the BC education system who have had a chance to consider the concept. Someone from the Ministry has to explain the concept to the educators. It is unlikely that the current Minister is interested enough in a new curriculum to be the promoter of the idea.

And then there is the chicken-or-the-egg problem. What would a 3D curriculum look like?—One that includes the mix of big ideas, approaches to learning about the big ideas, assessment that fits, and a wide range of resources? To really understand the 3D curriculum, one would need to see the range of these elements on a fluid website. However, most are not yet developed, so buying in to the new structure, understandably, would be difficult without seeing the full picture.

“Change won’t happen in a day.”

Sharon Richards said that “the work of the curriculum committees concluded too soon. There is much to be done—we are really just beginning. The direction of this curriculum is a gift and a burden.” It is a gift if it opens space for professional decisions about curriculum; it is a burden because it depends almost entirely on teachers to develop and implement it.

The Ministry has few resources dedicated to creating the new program. A one-day, in-service is not going to be enough. If a shift is to succeed, it depends on the work of teachers. In the current climate and conditions, this is an unrealistic expectation.

Professional Specialist Associations could do some of this work—but only with resources. They operate on a volunteer basis, with teacher members doing the PSA work in addition to their job.

The changes proposed to the curriculum comprise one of those proverbial “paradigm shifts” that requires extensive professional discussion and a shared experience and commitment. The Arts Education curriculum, preferably with different curricula to each area, will have to be integral to making the paradigm shift, if it is to succeed.