

## Chapter 3

# Complexifying the ‘Visualised’ Curriculum with Actor–Network Theory

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### ABSTRACT

*Rather than conceptualising the curriculum as a mandate which guides a teacher’s task of advancing the knowledge of students, or what the author will call the simple story, the curriculum as an object of complexities is explored in this article. The article considers how approaching the curriculum relationally can be a more fruitful quest than simply accepting that curriculum activity is predetermined, predictable, or standard. Drawing on actor-network theory and the fieldwork resulting from a funded, primary school Arts project in Australia, the curriculum is examined as a relational effect of education. In doing so, it is shown how interdependent webs of heterogeneous relations contribute to this entity called ‘the curriculum’, encouraging activity to be practised in particular ways, yet suggesting activity could be otherwise.*

### INTRODUCTION

Going back several years, the local primary school attended by my children at the time, advertised in the school newsletter that the school curriculum committee required new members and that interested parents were welcome. Not being particularly excited by canteen duty or volunteering in the uniform shop, I thought a school committee – especially one focused on the curriculum – sounded ideal. As an experienced primary school teacher and post-graduate student this was an area of the

school to which I was more than qualified (and interested) to contribute. I signed up immediately. At the first meeting there were a handful of teachers and parents with expertise in a range of professions: even a barrister and a paramedic. As it eventuated the advice of these two parents was more valued than my education knowledge because for this and then subsequent meetings we reviewed school policy – the number of EpiPens to take on school excursions, for instance, and the legality of failing to do so<sup>1</sup>. I was not so much offended by the (lack of) uptake of my ‘education expertise’ as puzzled by why a curriculum committee was named as such when it was a policy

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review committee in practice. "Excuse me," I ventured in a later meeting, "We have had three meetings and not discussed the curriculum." The reply was something like this: "Well, as a school we need to have 'a curriculum committee' but we also have a lot of school based policy requiring regular review and updating which must receive input from parents."

How to think about this conundrum? One response could be that in schools the boxes must be ticked in the name of accountability, not to mention liability, and the maximisation of time is often dealt with creatively. This wraps up the dilemma neatly, complete with a bow on top. Is it useful, however, to think about activity in this simplistic way?

One of the misleading consequences of thinking of the curriculum as an object or a thing is that there is an illusion of boundaries (Apple, 2000): that in naming objects they are set in place, are tangible and travel not only readily but in predictable ways (Law, 1999). And this was certainly the assumption undermined with the naming of the above curriculum committee. But the effects of the curriculum are most obvious in the hurly burly activity of the classroom. A number of the educators in the PhD study I conducted referred to the activity of picturing curriculum outcomes as 'visualising the curriculum'. I take this practice of visualising to be the smooth road in a classroom journey and, in this article, question the parameters and potentiality of a rough track. To do this I consider the relations which bring curriculum activity into being and the effects that are produced. Considering 'the curriculum' as a process which only exists through the interdependent activity which generates its existence is how I will approach this discussion. My focus is on how the human and non-human entities which produce this curriculum activity shape each other. I argue that thinking about the curriculum in relational terms is more useful for imagining how taken for granted labels such as 'learning', 'teachers' and 'outcomes' can be distributed more widely.

My aim is to interfere in curriculum realities and this in turn suggests that realities could have been otherwise: alternatives are possible.

## **'THE CURRICULUM'**

The curriculum as an object of educational enquiry has created thought provoking debate in the last decade (Apple, 2000; Moore & Young, 2001; Weiss et al., 2006; Young, 2008). One of the outstanding questions is: What is 'the curriculum'? Conversations surrounding the curriculum imply school activity involving teachers and students: subjects or topics to be taught at an educational institution (Encarta Dictionary, 2010). Centred within a broader framework, the curriculum here in the state of Victoria is framed as the Victorian Essential Learning Standards. According to the Victorian education organisation responsible for curriculum development:

*The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) outline what is important for all Victorian students to learn and develop during their time at school from Prep to Year 10. They provide a clear set of common state-wide standards which schools use to plan student learning programs, assess student progress and report to parents. (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2009)*

In line with the standardised, national curriculum being progressively introduced across states and territories in Australia, much of schooling is focused on school based 'standardised' curriculum activities which encourage students to remain in their classrooms in primary school or move from one classroom to another in secondary schools. Curriculum standards pursue a measure of quality based on what is worth knowing and supposedly acts as a mechanism to avoid gaps in student knowledge. Education standardisation is an ideal which suggests that somehow individual

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