

It will never be the same again?

As I write, the war against terrorism focused on Afghanistan, and the Australian election campaign, are entering their second week. By the time you read this article at least one will be concluded. I hope by then some of the pessimism, fear and insecurity of life after September 11 will have begun to dissipate. I keep hearing from national leaders, friends and the media that life “will never be the same again”. They are right. It could be better.

In the post September 11 world, it is timely to consider the role that education and, in particular, the role of subjects of the Human Society and Its Environment learning area can play in shaping our future. Even though terrorism has been a feature of many parts of the world for a long time, the events and the aftermath of September 11 have led people in every nation, but particularly western countries, to reassess their priorities, the direction of international policies and issues of defence. There can be no excuses for such attacks on innocent people, and in the United States general disbelief that other people in the world could hate them so much, is giving over to asking why, and to examining the impact of United States foreign policy in various parts of the world.

In Australia, educational goals and aims statements have long carried cultural understanding as one element and, in recent years, civics and citizenship has been a notable inclusion.

For example, one of the national goals of schooling states that:
3.5 all students understand and acknowledge the value of cultural and linguistic diversity, and possess the knowledge, skills and understanding to contribute to, and benefit from, such diversity in the Australian community and internationally.
(The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century)

What are we doing in schools to address these matters?

The curriculum

The Cultures strand of the K–6 Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE) Syllabus provides an excellent framework for studying cultural difference and for exploring such differences in terms of family, language, customs, religion, celebrations, history and government. There is considerable attention paid in each K–6 stage to exploring cultural difference. In Stage 1, the Department’s resource *Where the sun rises* gives an example of how the cultural differences of Japan can be introduced to some of our youngest students. This theme of difference is also picked-up in the Stage 1, Heritage Unit, *Treasures*, which explores difference amongst the background of students in a class.

In Stage 2, the K–6 HSIE syllabus places an important emphasis on general religious education that is carried over into Stage 3. Religious

difference and religious motivation are areas that could be explored in classrooms to encourage intercultural understanding. The Department has been working on a resource *Belief in action* to support these aspects of the K–6 HSIE syllabus. It is being finalised this term and is likely to be in schools at the beginning of Term 1, 2002.

Religion is an important part of cultural difference and many Australians, including prominent historians, have overlooked how religious motivation has been an important factor for many of the people and events of our past and present society. As Australia develops into a multi-faith society, the imperative to understand religious difference is acute if we are to learn to accept difference and not to be threatened by it. Such acceptance does not necessarily mean agreement with, or even respect for, particular beliefs, but it does mean tolerance and practical application of the right to freedom of religion. Understanding both religious motivation and religious cultural differences provide a basis for communication and the social cohesion that comes from accepting difference.

The secondary curriculum poses more challenges for teaching about cultural difference. The mandatory courses in Years 7–10 history and geography do provide opportunities for such studies. In Stage 4 history, the study of ancient and medieval societies provide important understanding of past civilisations and cultures and the section on Indigenous societies both in Australia and overseas is a welcomed addition to understanding cultural difference.

It is not until Stage 5 that serious issues about the nature of Australian society are raised in relation to fundamental values. Here consideration of Aboriginal history in the 20th Century, White Australia Policy, immigration, multiculturalism, the changing role of woman and the nature of work, all explore the fundamental values of Australian society. This is an excellent course and challenges students to consider the factors that have made Australia what it is today. The issue for teachers is in balancing an exploration of cultural difference with other elements of the course.

In geography, the themes of environments and communities also provide opportunities to study cultural difference and the values section is explicit about intercultural understanding. To its credit, the Stage 4 syllabus refers to social, cultural, economic and political systems and to shared social organisations, but the overwhelming focus of content is the environment and the opportunities to explore intercultural understanding within the human environment is limited. While the topic, Global citizenship does not give cultural difference explicit mention and gives no direction to explore why there are spatial variations in life opportunities throughout the world, it does make reference to human rights and spatial variations.

The Stage 5 Geography Syllabus picks up on the diversity of Australian communities and Outcome 5.8: accounts for differences within and between

Australian communities is stronger than its Stage 4 equivalent. However, the content description may not strongly support the outcome. Topic 5A1, lists factors contributing to a sense of community but gives no indication about accounting for them. While cultural difference might be raised while studying Topics 5A2 and 5A3 it is not a focus and Topic 5A4: Australia in its regional and global context, recognises culture as a factor in forming regional and global links and as a reason for diversity. However, recognition of, and knowing about, are not accounting for and understanding the reasons behind cultural difference.

Understanding cultural difference becomes an important part of many of the Years 11–12 syllabuses, notably Society and Culture. There are also optional syllabuses in Years 7–10 that encourage the study of cultural differences including the Asian Social Studies, Studies of Religion, Studies of Society and Aboriginal Studies.

The teaching

The curriculum is only one factor in teaching about cultural difference. Implementation is another. Translating syllabuses into lessons is of the utmost importance if students are to explore cultural difference. To some extent, it is a matter of choices within the syllabus frameworks, of case studies, of resources and of emphasis. Teachers concerned that their students study cultural difference can frame their lessons to do this and teachers who, for what ever reason, do not want to pursue this emphasis can give it little attention.

The questions I am raising for all teachers are fundamental ones: What will the attitude of our society be to difference? Will we be able to accept, embrace and celebrate difference or will it be a threat, promoting division and entrenching prejudice? What sort of Australia do we want for the future?

It is unlikely to be a simple choice of one or the other. On the intercultural understanding continuum it is a question of where we are as individuals and as a society and, are we looking to move towards greater acceptance of difference or to move away from that acceptance?

I believe this issue of difference will be a defining feature of the Australia that emerges in the 21st Century. It was a major factor defining Australia at Federation at the beginning of the 20th Century. As we look back on that century, we see what a growing acceptance of difference meant for women, Aboriginal people, migrants and the whole Australian community.

Yet, in recent years, the rise of support for some new political parties, and even more recent events, would indicate deeply embedded prejudice in the Australian community to difference that quickly wells to the surface, irrespective of rational argument, given the right trigger—illegal immigration.

Education remains a key to social change and public education has always been at the one time both the preserver of social norms and the agent of change. One strand of educational philosophy has always pursued education as being about changing society.

Such changes can be seen in the stories of migrant students entering our schools. They have felt the impact of the social norms that quickly immerse them into the culture of being Australian. Yet, the same institutions can at another level change community awareness about environmental issues, improve the community's knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal history and culture and shape the community's thinking about our future.

In an increasingly multicultural and multi-faith society, Australians of all cultural backgrounds are asking about the sort of society they want in the future. In NSW, which continues to take the vast majority of the migrants and refugees coming into Australia, this question appears more urgent.

If understanding and accepting cultural difference is a focus of the goals of education then there are implications for us as teachers. If we are to teach intercultural understanding then we need to first look inwardly. We need to:

- improve our own understanding of other people and cultures
- examine our own attitudes and values and confront our prejudices
- review our teaching to consider where and how we teach about cultural difference in our classrooms
- model openness to and acceptance of difference in our classrooms
- resist and expose the stereotyping of other people, their culture and their beliefs
- encourage in-depth understanding that addresses prejudice and promotes tolerance.

The Department has an excellent policy statement to assist teachers in such classroom activity. *Controversial Issues in Schools* provides common sense advice to teachers about these matters. If you are unable to find a copy in your school, in the *Manual of Educational Management 11.4*, then it is available on the Curriculum Support web site:

<http://www.curriculumsupport.nsw.edu.au/hsie/index.cmf>
under Teaching resources.

Schools

Schools are not reliant totally on the formal curriculum and classroom teaching to develop intercultural understanding. School and community activities often reflect the desire to celebrate difference in special days and activities that encourage students to share their cultural backgrounds, to have them affirmed by others and to accept the cultural background of others. Community engagement is an important activity for students to relate to people with different cultural backgrounds. Nothing dispels the fear of the other more than communicating and developing relationships with those others.

Recently, the Access Asia program piloted a course, Engaging communities. Teachers and members of a number of communities from Asian countries explored how they could assist schools to hear the authentic voices of Asian people in Australia with a view to opening up dialogue and establishing relationships that would change attitudes to difference.

On a more personal note, I have been reading the book, The Colour of Difference, which was recently launched and available through Federation Press. It contains the personal stories of twenty-seven young Australians who were adopted as children into Australian families from overseas countries. It provides authentic insights into what it was like for these children to be adopted into an alien Australian society. Each story has its own interest. Some are positive and others negative about their experience. If teachers want material that young people can relate to then any of these stories would help to open class discussion and tap into the issues of difference, acceptance and Australian identity which feature in most of our syllabuses.

Any comments about how intercultural understanding might be pursued through the curriculum, teaching and school activities are welcomed. You can always send a message or an email to john.gore@det.nsw.edu.au

The Australia of tomorrow lies in the hands of the students of today. What should they be learning about intercultural understanding that might impact on their attitude to difference?

It is true, the world will never be the same again. It could be better. Are we doing enough to promote intercultural understanding?

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