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Western Australian Music Teachers and the WACE Music Syllabus Five Years Down the Track: Where Are We Now?

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Abstract: Western Australia introduced a new Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) Music course for Year 11 and 12 students in 2009. Course construction was protracted due to political interference, input from vested interests within the music teaching community and adverse community publicity. The result has been the creation of a long and potentially confusing syllabus document. This article reports on music teacher experiences with the new course five years after its initial implementation. A questionnaire was distributed to all WACE music teachers asking them to respond to 27 statements drawn from a literature review relating to course design in music education, and the WACE syllabus document. At the end of the questionnaire, participants were invited to provide extended responses regarding the new course. Extended responses were frequently negative and sometimes contradictory, leading the researchers to conclude that after five years, the WACE music syllabus document, as a driver of 'curriculum', is creating a degree of discontent and confusion in the minds of many music teachers. The lessons are obvious: for any curriculum to achieve a desired educational outcome, the syllabus document needs to be clear and consistent, be guided by a philosophy which is coherent and transparent to teachers, and drawn from the relevant literature on the subject.

Introduction

Western Australia (WA) introduced a new Western Australian Certificate of Education (WACE) for Year 11 and 12 across all subjects including Music in 2009 after over six years of planning and design (Curriculum Council, 2009). Construction of the courses had been protracted and controversial primarily because of their underlying outcomes-based philosophy which divided both the teaching and wider communities, and its subsequent abandonment (Donnelly, 2007; Berlach & McNaught, 2007; Alderson & Martin, 2007; Dawson & Venville, 2006; Taylor, 2005; Stateline, 2006). The WACE music course in particular drew widespread publicity and criticism, and was even negatively featured on the front pages of the local newspaper, the *West Australian* (Berlach & McNaught, 2007). Given the controversy and fundamental structural changes which occurred during its construction, the authors set out to explore secondary music teachers' experiences with the course five

years after its implementation, and in particular music teachers' comprehension of the philosophy underpinning the 153-page syllabus document. A questionnaire was sent to all WACE Music teachers in WA. Teachers were asked to rate the course against researcher-identified best-practice design principles drawn from the music education literature, and were then invited to provide extended responses outlining their experiences with, and reaction to, the course. This article deals specifically with the extended responses.

Participant teacher responses overall were varied. A minority of teachers were broadly pleased with the new course, but others described it as a missed opportunity for more fundamental change. However, disturbingly, a number of the extended responses were highly contradictory suggesting that after five years, some music teachers still do not fully understand the actual mechanics of the syllabus document. Besides presenting music teacher reactions to the WACE music course, this article addresses the wider issues of transparency in course design and the relationship between syllabus and 'curriculum'. The WA experience becomes highly relevant in the face of an emerging Australian National Curriculum and its interpretation by state-based curriculum bodies. Even the best of educational intentions can become clouded if problems are inherent in the syllabus document and its wider interpretation by teachers as 'curriculum'.

Background

Prior to 2009, the music curriculum for Year 11 and 12 students in WA remained relatively unchanged since its inception in 1966. Music had been introduced as a leaving subject which involved a 50% school-assessed written component and a 50% external summative written / aural and performance examination. From 1984, the course, known as TEE Music (Tertiary Entrance Examination) was the only pathway into studying Music at a WA university. The TEE Music syllabus was organised around four components: Perception, Literature, Composition and Performance. Students studied Western Art (Classical) Music at the exclusion of any other genre. From the 1990s, there were some opportunities for students to engage in Jazz and Contemporary (Popular) Music but only in terms of performance and only for selected instruments. In 1993, a wholly school-assessed alternative Music course called Music in Society (MIS) was introduced for students wanting to study genres other than Western Art Music. However, this course was an enrichment course only and could not be counted towards a university entrance score.

The TEE music course was highly prescriptive and largely inflexible in terms of student input. It offered only one music context (Classical music), including set pieces of music for study, and the course document was compartmentalised into a series of discrete and decontextualized musical skills. Although inherently 'unmusical' in its decontextualized skill-based structure and assessment practices, it was a relatively easy syllabus to teach.

In 2009, the new WACE Music course was introduced into Year 11 and 12. Reform was initiated in the mid-1990s when the then State Government legislated to rationalise the number of courses on offer, and was underpinned by an outcomes-based philosophy. Initial planning commenced in 1998, and course design was facilitated by the newly created Curriculum Council of Western Australia (Alderson & Martin, 2007) who drew upon experts within each learning area to draft each course, with the first draft being published in 2005 (Curriculum Council, 2005).

The design brief for all courses was based upon core principles of inclusivity, flexibility, integration, breadth and balance, and collaboration and partnerships (Donnelly, 2007; Alderson & Martin, 2007). Each course was to be developmentally conceived, and the outcomes-based philosophy was to be embedded as a driver of assessment in each course,

and not the traditional ‘add on’ (Alderson & Martin, 2007). Assessment was to be largely formative and authentic (Alderson & Martin, 2007). Further, course design was to be based around a broad definition of curriculum; that “a curriculum is much more than a syllabus”, and “curriculum...is dynamic and includes all learning experiences provided for the student” (Curriculum Council, 1998, p.16). To meet the developmental design brief for all courses, three stages were offered; stage one courses were wholly school-assessed while stage two and three courses were externally examined and counted towards a university entry (ATAR) score. The stage two and three courses were of increasing levels of difficulty and weighted differently in the final ATAR calculations. For music, stage one effectively replaced the Music in Society course, while stages two and three replaced TEE Music (Curriculum Council, 2009).

Redesigning the music course offered the potential for music to be delivered to upper school classes in new ways. As noted, flexibility and student choice were among the key design principles given to course developers. For the first time, non-Western Art Music genres were included in the examinable stages of the course. Initially, eight musical genres were mooted for inclusion including film music and music theatre, but these were eventually reduced to four broad genres: World Music (non-Western), Popular Music, Jazz and Western Art Music. Difficulties incorporating these four disparate genres into one examinable course saw the course designers opt to quarantine the course into four separate ‘contexts’ in stages 2 and 3. Thus, rather than study music from all genres, students would be asked to choose one (Curriculum Council, 2009). The World Music context was quietly dropped from 2009 as no schools opted to deliver it. The practical implications of teaching multiple contexts in the classroom meant that usually a decision would be made by the music teacher and school as to which context would be taught, and all students in the class would engage with that context. Thus a key cornerstone of flexibility was effectively eliminated by the practical reality of common assessment within the course.

Other problems emerged during the course design process. It quickly became obvious that a uniform and generic course design structure favoured by the Curriculum Council did not fit with the needs of all subjects (Taylor, 2005). The uniform structure had been most evident in the 2005 Music draft, coincidentally written by an ‘arts’ learning area expert who was not a musician. Accordingly, the word ‘music’ rarely occurred in the Music course draft. Lack of subject-specific content, skills and understanding, and vague language were common complaints of the 2005 draft across all subjects. Berlach and McNaught (2007) stated that WA teachers were confronted with the frustration of “how to decipher obtuse and often irrelevant documentation” (p.5).

Virulent adverse publicity followed the publication of the 2005 WACE drafts (Berlach & McNaught, 2007; Dawson & Venville, 2006), and the music course was one of the courses at the centre of the controversy (Hardie, 2007; Peirce, 2007). Critics from the largely conservative established music teaching fraternity claimed the course was being ‘dumbed down’, while others criticised its implied increase in teaching workload due to its outcomes-based assessment structure (Stateline, 2006). In response to a parliamentary inquiry in late 2005, the curriculum council convened an emergency meeting of interested parties with the aim of making the Music course ‘workable’. The result was the creation of a steering committee to oversee a rewrite of the course. One of the authors initially participated in the rewriting process, and one of the first steering committee directives by ministerial decree in 2006 was to abandon the generic course template (Berlach & McNaught, 2007).

More significantly, all new courses, including Music, had been conceived with an outcomes-based, constructivist focus, with students graded against a series of developmental statements subsequently dismissed by critics as highly subjective and statistically invalid (Andrich, 2006). Given a public outcry from interest groups such as PLATO (People

Lobbying Against Teaching Outcomes), a further ministerial directive changed the assessment model back to a graded numeric system, but the steering committee redesign brief was not altered to reflect the change in assessment type, thus creating a significant mismatch between the original course document and the new assessment profile. Further, the rationale for the 2005 Music course draft was guided by a series of generic arts learning outcomes. These outcomes did not sit well within the music context, and following petitioning of the Curriculum Council by members of the steering committee, were rewritten as music specific learning outcomes. However, the new music outcomes were not then used to inform the course redesign, presenting another mismatch between course rationale and intent, and course structure.

Two other problems emerged within the steering committee. The committee was too big and brought too many divergent voices to the table. Discussion became bogged down in course minutiae at the expense of reviewing course direction and structure. Secondly, it became apparent that while the will for reform was evident, committee members lacked experience in course design, having for the most part only taught or experienced the prescriptive TEE Music course. Over time, the course began to mutate back towards a traditional prescriptive, decontextualized and content-driven TEE model based around five 'organisers': aural & theory, analysis, composition, performance and cultural & historical perspectives. Problems were exacerbated by the Curriculum Council's desire for a 'quick fix' and not to address the underlying document design flaws.

In 2008, the revised course document was released for public comment. The other author attended a series of music teacher meetings arranged by the Curriculum Council from mid-2008 to provide teachers with the opportunity to review the syllabus document in a round-table format. During these meetings it became evident that various factions were advocating for particular aspects of the course. The Curriculum Council attempted to accommodate all factional interests, ultimately resulting in the creation of a highly prescriptive 153-page syllabus document which was complex, inequitable and at times contradictory. The original design principles established in 1998 were lost in the production of a 'camel' i.e. a horse designed by a committee. The same author was also invited to join a Curriculum Advisory Committee (CAC) for Music after the course was rolled out in 2009. Within these meetings, superficial inequities within the syllabus document have been attended to but there has been no major change to the design of the course.

In summary, the development of the WACE Music course was convoluted, fractured and suffered from political interference, factional vested interest and a diluted underpinning philosophy. However, it needs to be clearly stated that the authors' intentions at this point is not to critique the original design brief or debate the outcomes-based principles driving course reform, but rather to highlight the protracted and fractured construction process. The result, in the eyes of the authors, is a disconnected, overly long and complicated syllabus document with a rationale that does not inform the original outcomes-based structure, and an unrelated assessment structure. With constantly changing goal posts, and the Curriculum Council's desire for a quick political 'fix', the final implemented version of the WACE Music course is far removed from its original design brief.

Course design principles in music education

Given the Curriculum Council's original stated intention to create a 'curriculum' rather than just a syllabus document, the researchers chose to take a holistic view of the Music course when investigating music teachers' views on it; they chose to explore teacher experiences with the course as 'curriculum' and not just as 'syllabus'. As Grundy (1998) states, the idea of a syllabus as curriculum operates at the level of *object* whereby the syllabus

is a thing to be taught, learned, facilitated or transferred, but he also describes the function of curriculum as *action*, as part of a broader process of enacting what is mandated or planned. In this sense, the learners matter, the teacher matters and the content and context matters. Churchill, Ferguson, Godinho, Johnson, Keddie, Letts, Mackay, McGill, Moss, Nagel, Nicholson and Vick (2013) state that these things do not sit outside the curriculum – “they are, in fact, the curriculum” (p.187). The definition of curriculum as object and action sits within a wider pedagogical framework with the teacher, students, subject matter and broader school environment in dynamic interaction. Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery and Taubman (1995) state that within this pedagogical context, different discourses exist, and different voices within each discourse. Therefore, for a course to be robust, ongoing dissection and debate is essential.

Further, all curriculum also operates as a cultural construction. Grundy (1998) states that any course is a construct of time and place, with social and political forces shaping a curriculum to meet perceived social, cultural, political and economic ends. This view of the curriculum as a dynamic social document is in opposition to the traditional view of a curriculum as something universal, unchanging and obvious. Churchill et. al. (2013) state that “the curriculum is covered with the fingerprints of those who develop it, and eventually those who enact it and interact with it” (p. 193). Accordingly, course developers bring their own values, attitudes, interests and priorities to the table, even when they state they are acting in the best interests of others. Given the above, the authors chose to explore music teachers’ comprehension of the WACE Music course from a pedagogical and cultural curriculum perspective, and not just as a syllabus document.

When establishing a framework for evaluating the WACE Music course, the researchers chose to benchmark it against principles of best-practice design and content described by respected music educators over a long period of time. Music education research has built up a considerable body of knowledge relating to curriculum best-practice, particularly over the past 30 years, and while few have addressed course design head-on (aside from the English National Curriculum debates of the early 1990s), much can be generated and collated from the literature. Given the sheer amount of material available, the researchers grouped information under eight broad emergent headings:

- Philosophy,
- Performance,
- Composition,
- Listening,
- World Music,
- Music Technology,
- Assessment
- Integration

Space in this article precludes a full elaboration of each category. However, themes relating to philosophy was drawn from the writings of Swanwick (1988, 1999), Reimer (1970, 2005), Elliott (2005), Walker (2006) and Regelski (2005), and centred around issues of relevance to students, independence from other subject models, and the importance of a coherent guiding philosophy during the design process. The place of performance in the curriculum was drawn from Swanwick (1998), Reimer (2005), Bowman (1994a), Abeles, Hoffer and Klotman (1995), Jaques-Dalcroze (1921), Priest (1989), and Tang (1995), and revolved around the centrality of performance in lifelong learning, integration within the curriculum, breadth of required skills and the role of spontaneity in performance. Composition was drawn from Bowman (1994a, 1994b), Elliott (2005), Jorgensen (1997),

Kaschub & Smith (2009), Swanwick (1979, 1994, 1999), Burke (2007), Burnard (2005), Reimer (2005), Regelski (2005) and centred upon the wider social value of composition in the transmission of culture, the relationship between creativity and technique, ownership and the student voice, and links to performance.

Themes relating to listening centred around the range and type of music to be included, links to culture and social hierarchy, and the value judgements placed upon music by the teacher and students. Further to the authors already cited, additional authors included Hargreaves and North (1997), Payne (1980), Schmidt (1985), Hargreaves & Coleman (1981), Hansen and Hansen (1991) and Rawlings and Leow (1995). The place of world music in the curriculum revolved around the value of broadening student understanding beyond the Western musical concepts, its role in understanding and accepting culture and its place in building classroom inclusivity. Jorgensen (1997), Forari (2007), Schippers (2010), Swanwick (1979) and Bowman (1994a, 1994b) provided the bulk of the thematic material. Music technology discussion centred around its value as a tool to encourage student centred learning and independence, and its potential for integration throughout the curriculum, with additional writings by Abeles and Custodero (2012) and Cain (2004). Assessment focused upon meaningful and authentic assessment, transparency, breadth of assessment tasks and issues relating to process and product (Abeles & Custodero, 2010; Swanwick, 1988, 1999; Regelski, 2005; Russell & Austin, 2010, Lehman, 1998). Finally, integration addressed praxis across listening, composition and performance, as well as decontextualisation and compartmentalisation (Swanwick, 1979; 1988, 1999; Barrett, 2005; Elliott, 2005). Further, three subsidiary themes were generated relating to the syllabus document itself. These included the way in which the syllabus initiates contact with the content, its motivational value to students, and ease of understanding and delivery for teachers (Abeles & Custodero, 2010; Bowman, 2005a; Burnard, 2005; Elliott, 2005; Ross, 1995, 1998; Regelski, 2005; and Swanwick, 1999).

The eight categories were informed by the writings of over 30 different authors. Many others were reviewed, but a point of saturation and diminishing return was reached, where no new themes emerged and subsequent articles appeared to reinforce existing themes (Blor, Frankland, Thomas & Robson, 2001). At this point, it is important to note that the eight categories were not discrete but integrated, and were categories of convenience only for grounding the research. The authors also acknowledge a degree of subjectivity in the generation of themes within each category; each theme represents their interpretation of the overarching discussion threads. However, again, the purpose of identifying categories and themes was to provide a comparative benchmark on the issues pertinent to course design in music education, and not to make value judgements on these themes per se, except in the sense of mapping them against the WACE Music syllabus document.

Methodology

To interrogate the Music course as a pedagogical and cultural document requiring robust discussion, the researchers chose to adopt Fielding's (2004) approach, and engage with the teachers' voice, to speak with teachers, not for teachers. While acknowledging that Fielding was referring to the importance of the student voice, the same principle applies.

A questionnaire was designed with 27 statements linked to the categories and themes generated by the literature review. To counteract the potential for bias and leading statements, statements were framed in a mixture of positive and negative orientations, and Cronbach alpha coefficient ratings of 0.89 gave the researchers a degree of confidence in the reliability of their questionnaire. Every school delivering the WACE Music course was sent the

questionnaire, on which participant teachers were asked to rate each statement using a five-point Likert scale. Of the 130 schools contacted, 60 teachers returned the completed questionnaire, representing a return rate of 46.15% which is statistically large enough to provide reliable data (Bell, 2005; Punch, 1998). Of these, over 60% had been teaching for more than six years and thus had experience with the old TEE course as well as the new WACE course, and were split at exactly 50% on gender. Of the respondents, 47% came from government schools, 33% from independent schools and 20% came from catholic schools, and finally 37% were teaching the Western Art Music context, 35% teaching the Contemporary Music context, 2% teaching Jazz, and 26% from schools able to teach more than one context. Thus a good spread of responses was received.

For the researchers, the initial quantitative questionnaire provided broad data relating to the teachers and the WACE Music course. Quantitative data produced average mean scores between 3 and 3.5 across most items with low standard deviations suggesting a degree of mild satisfaction with the course. However, the extended responses provided depth, and were largely at odds with the quantitative ratings due to the frequency of negative comments. The extended responses which form the basis for this article were initially coded using a grounded theory approach that the themes emerge from the data, separate to the quantitative data. Three response-related themes emerged: positive, negative, and confused. A representative selection of responses are presented under these sub-headings and scrutinised in relation to the literature review categories and themes.

Findings

This section now presents a summary of extended responses in the ‘teachers voice’. Teachers were given free reign when writing extended responses; they were simply invited to expand upon on any aspect of the course using the questionnaire as a prompt. While some chose to confine their comments to the syllabus document, the majority unconsciously described their experiences of the course under the broader definition of ‘curriculum’, particularly the pedagogical curriculum, as exemplified by the following:

“Even though you’ve specifically asked about the syllabus and not our implementation of it, I think its difficult to separate the two. The level one might agree or disagree with a statement may be impacted by how much they delve into the facet through their teaching of it to students”.

Some responses addressed the cultural curriculum:

“I feel that the Contemporary course is more relevant to students’ lives and needs, but the Western Art course gives them a much higher breadth of skills and knowledge. We encourage our contemporary students to study the Western Art course as it prepares them much better for the WAAPA entry exam....and entry into other Music courses such as those offered by UWA”.

Positive responses

A handful of positive comments spoke about the course in relation to the old TEE Music course, and in guarded terms:

“The WACE document gives teachers more freedom and flexibility than the old TEE course”.

“Whilst I feel that my answers reflected a rather negative attitude towards the WACE course, there are some aspects that I still enjoy”.

“I believe the Music syllabus does an adequate job of framing the needs and skills required of students”.

One teacher spoke of the potential for greater inclusivity provided by the WACE Music course, but also identified the cultural curriculum issue of which music is most worthy of study:

“I believe that the WACE Music course gives a wider variety of students the opportunity to study Music in Year 11/ 12 as an examinable subject, but we are still creating this ‘stream’ of high and low level Music through the Western Art v Contemporary courses...”

No respondents discussed positive aspects of the WACE Music course in relation to specific elements of the course, or the researcher derived categories.

Negative responses

The frequency of negative responses outweighed positive responses by a ratio of nearly 4:1. In terms of the syllabus as an aspirational document, one teacher stated:

“When a student with interest and ability emerges, the school and our local community supports the parents in providing every opportunity for them to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and experience to make aspirations to tertiary musical study possible. This is not done using Stage Two and Stage Three Curriculum Council courses”.

For this teacher, stages two and three of the WACE Music course were not motivational to students, nor did it inspire his students to future studies in music. The most common negative themes related to the pedagogical limitations of course study contexts at stage two and three, and their implications for students:

“Time is a big factor in not being able to allow the students to explore music other than Western Art”.

“I’ve answered the questions from a WAM [Western Art Music] perspective rather than the broader document, knowing that most schools (mine included) teach only Western Art Music... the course doesn’t leave time for students to do much listening outside of their context”.

“However, the context specific idea is quite constricting and only allows time for one context to be covered adequately. We cannot produce well rounded musicians whilst focussing on a single context. These comments / answers may seem harsh on a new document / syllabus, however, the wonderful chance to create a WACE Music course that enabled and empowered students to explore and develop their own musicality in areas of interest while still supporting common skills was frankly missed”.

The comment relating to a ‘missed opportunity’ was echoed by a number of respondents. Further, it became evident that a growing number of schools were opting out of the examinable context specific stage two and three in favour of the non-context specific stage one.

“The course I have developed at stage 1 is not context specific. It is student centred and focussed upon performance. The intention is that students will leave school as well equipped hobby musicians able to listen to, analyse, arrange and perform the music in which they are interested and play it together with their friends”.

In relation to researcher-derived categories, one teacher commented on performance assessment:

“Discrepancies in the performance examinations, for example, having teachers’ exam [sic] who have little experience and are out of their instrument and context area. 20 minutes of performance for examinations in 3A/3B”.

While the above was not necessarily syllabus related, criticism of the composition component was more WACE Music specific:

“There are times I feel the WAM course is quite restrictive in the area of composition”.

Another respondent offered the following elaboration:

“I feel the syllabus does not meet the creative needs of students when it comes to composing. The syllabus is centred on teaching ‘rules’ and techniques rather than allowing free creative musical expression. Although this works for most students (as most have not composed music in their own time) for those that do wish to be more creative – the syllabus does not meet their needs. Also when it comes to exams and tests the “composition” element is not composition at all, rather the musical equivalent of painting by numbers!”

Responses relating to WACE composition were similar to complaints labelled against the older TEE Music course, illustrating how little had changed between the two. Listening and aural drew criticism for inequity between the three teaching contexts:

“In theory, the aural section is supposed to be common to both Jazz and WAM but the aural components of the Jazz and WAM syllabus are different as they must be as the aural requirements of Jazz musicians are different from WAM. This is an area that must be addressed. Either the aural MUST be the same in both syllabuses or they must be different and therefore assessed differently”.

Listening, based around set works, drew criticism:

“Listening: focus quite narrow with only four prescribed works (for contemp.) per semester”.

Assessment also drew criticism both for lack of authenticity and equity.

“There are discrepancies with the assessment outline weightings”.

“The external exams do not correspond to our expectations of the content and style of assessments, particularly the extended answer”.

“The skills required for the Contemporary course are not nearly as difficult or as in-depth as those required in the Western Art course. (Yet they are still being marked against each other on the same scale)”.

Finally, the question of integration was raised as follows:

“Composition is very much exam style rather than performance-linked”.

Confused responses

More disturbingly, some responses indicated that some teachers had misinterpreted the syllabus document. One teacher spoke of the disappearance of sight reading and technical work from the performance exam, despite them still being performance options for students: “... too many important aspects like sight reading and technical work are now not part of the exams – students can play the pieces – but can they read and interpret the music?”

Another presented a confused view on authentic assessment in composition, given that the syllabus no longer calls for authentic assessment in this area.

“Trying to incorporate authentic composition experiences is also tricky as access to competent / professional musicians to play the compositions ‘live’, is limited”.

However, it was consistent references to the defunct World Music context which surprised the researchers:

“The delivery of World Music curriculum should be different from all the other 3 contexts. If this can be made compulsory, then there is no problem with comparability of assessment”.

“I really like the fact a unit on world music is included. What is lacking from the teaching point of view is a base on which teachers can draw knowledge from as it is very easy to become disrespectfully [sic] to a culture if one gets it wrong or not ‘quite there’.”

One respondent even included a long explanation for justifying the place of World Music within the curriculum:

“I would like to reiterate the idea that World Music needs to be understood from a cultural perspective. Even though there must be some symbol to represent and make sense of its notation in music that uses non-western notation, the entire understanding of cultural music e.g. African, Indigenous, Chinese must be understood from a sociological and historical perspective and on equal footing. Hence a multicultural approach as well as an inter-cultural approach avoids music of other culture being superseded by Western culture. There is a need to change direction in perspective if we want students to understand and interact with cultures within their society!”

The function of technology within the Music course also drew confusing responses.

“Part 6: re technology; course allows for the use of technology but does not mandate (or encourage) its use. This is dependent on the teacher and the school resources available. E.g. I make heavy use of Aural Training software (Auralia)”.

“The ability to use music technology is limited – the school’s IT department are not helpful and don’t have the time to visit Music. Our school budget doesn’t include software for music when we are competing with other subject areas such as Maths and T&E for money etc”.

“...maybe a whole unit on a couple of music softwares would benefit the students...”

Technology was described as an object to be mandated rather than a teaching tool. That the syllabus document makes little or no reference to the use of technology does not clarify the issue for teachers.

The preceding responses present a small selection of the ‘teachers’ voice’. On balance, the majority of extended responses indicated a degree of dissatisfaction with aspects of the course document and its impact upon their teaching, but the inaccurate responses in relation to actual syllabus document content baffled the researchers.

Discussion

This research was born partly out of a desire to interrogate teacher’s experiences with the WACE Music course after its first five years in operation, and by Pinar et. al’s. (1995) general call for ongoing robust dissection and debate. Given the WACE Music course’s convoluted creation and gradual evolution back towards its preceding prescriptive TEE course model, the researchers expected to find a degree of teacher satisfaction, and this was evidenced in the initial quantitative questionnaire findings. The syllabus document well reflected its cultural construction because it was covered in the fingerprints of those involved in its redesigned i.e. the steering committee post 2005, and the 2008 round-table forums with Music teachers steeped in the TEE Music syllabus tradition. However, it was the surprising frequency of negative extended responses which ran contrary to the quantitative data that prompted this article. Given the high level of teacher input into the course redesign post 2005, why were so many teachers dissatisfied? The extended responses primarily located the syllabus document with Grundy’s (1998) pedagogical curriculum as both object and action, with the object informing the action. Teachers rarely separated interrogation of syllabus from curriculum, suggesting that for most, the WACE Music syllabus sits at the core of their own curriculum. Therefore, WA Music teachers appear largely unhappy with the influence of the syllabus upon their own teaching.

Given the freedom of teachers to comment upon any aspect of the course, the researchers were surprised that no-one queried the length of the syllabus, or contradictions between rationale, structure and assessment. Teachers consciously confined their comments to the pedagogical side of the syllabus as ‘operational curriculum’ while unconsciously identifying issues associated with the cultural curriculum. That no teachers commented on the

structure and length of the document, apart from deficiencies with the course contexts, suggests that many teachers may sadly view a syllabus document of this length and complexity as the norm. For the researchers, this potentially highlights WA's lack of a culture of Music course and curriculum design discourse. Having been imprinted with the preceding TEE Music course model for over 40 years, many respondents indicated a desire for change (missed opportunity) but were not sure of what change should look like because of a lack of engagement with alternative models. This may partly reflect the tyranny of distance and isolation of WA as well as a degree of complacency. The researchers assert that WA needs a culture of robust discussion, and lack of a history of discourse is partly what has led to the creation of the current ad hoc course. To inform the discourse, the music education literature needs to be front and centre.

On a wider level, if a syllabus operating as curriculum is a cultural construct, then Churchill et al. (2013) state that teachers are cultural workers who propagate the values, beliefs and attitudes embedded in that syllabus. They give tacet approval to the syllabus, unless they consciously challenge it. The level of dissatisfaction indicated in this research suggests that the current WACE Music course warrants challenging, but the drive for change needs to come from music teachers. Friere (1998) states that teachers in this situation cannot remain neutral. Further, Churchill et al. (2013) describes teachers as critical consumers and creators of personal curriculum. Music teachers are professionals who draw from a body of pre-existing knowledge that plays to the strengths of their students, creating meaningful learning experiences. There is a tight fit between curriculum and learners, so when there are flaws with the curriculum as object, such as the WACE Music syllabus, it can distort teachers view of curriculum as action. Ultimately, any curriculum plays out as praxis. Salas, Tenorio, Walters and Weiss (2004) claim that quality teachers are able to move beyond the textbook, or in this case, move beyond the WACE Music syllabus, but states that this not always easy for new teachers. Despite the failings of any syllabus document, good teachers will still find a way to meaningfully engage beyond syllabus confines. Kemmis and Gootenboer (2008) describe this ability as 'active alignment to maximise learning' (in Churchill et al., p205). For music teachers, a crotchet is still a crotchet, regardless of whichever syllabus is in play. However, it takes courage, confidence, knowledge and skill to move beyond the safety of the syllabus, especially in high stakes examinable subjects. The danger with the WACE Music syllabus is that by not drawing from the literature on course design best-practice, it potentially distorts the operational curriculum of less experienced teachers, leading to impoverished outcomes for students.

When teacher responses were examined against the music education literature, negative responses coalesced around the compartmentalising of the course into genre-based contexts. Teachers described this as restricting rather than liberating, thus unconsciously identifying with wider perspectives on the role curriculum plays in building well-rounded musicians. Equity between course contexts was a recurring response in terms of workload and expectations. Further, the creation of course contexts appeared to reinforce established cultural beliefs that Western Art music is more rigorous and therefore more worthy of study, despite the same teachers often acknowledging the value of Contemporary music in motivational terms to students. Many teachers still appear focused upon producing a small elite cohort suitable for tertiary study at the expense of developing life-longer learners. In this, the creation of course contexts at stage two and three has heightened cultural divisions in music education, and is out of step with international practice.

More specifically, the reduction of process-based activities such as composition to a set of prescriptive technical exercises drew the most negative responses on both pedagogical and cultural levels. In cultural terms, The WACE syllabus represents a return to the TEE syllabus past, and is not in step with the literature. While some teachers identified this as

problematic, the current composition component reflects the values and beliefs of those who created it. In pedagogical terms, the type of activities described within the composition component must impact teachers' operational curriculum aside from the few with the courage to see beyond the limitations of the WACE syllabus. This section of the WACE course is also considerably at odds with the aims of the Australian Arts Curriculum (Music), which has exploration and creative expression through composition – 'making music' – at its core (ACARA, 2014).

As a document, the level of confusion identified in some of the extended responses suggests that after five years, some teachers are still not fully familiar with the mechanics of the course document. This finding was worrying, and led the researchers to consider the length of the document as a possible reason. A 153-page syllabus is contrary to literature descriptions of best-practice relating to ease of understanding. Further, that one teacher described stage two and three of the course as actively discouraging to students suggest that the document is not motivational, and is another example of the course being at odds with its original design brief. When comparing the WACE Music syllabus to the literature on best practice, the authors noted that teachers primarily identified the categories of philosophy, composition, listening, performance and assessment as areas of concern and for reasons the authors could only speculate, there was confusion for some in relation to the place of World Music and technology. The researchers argue that despite WA's lack of a culture of critical course discourse, WA music teachers were still able to pinpoint areas of concern with the philosophy and content of the WACE Music syllabus, and they spoke at length about its impact upon their personal curriculum.

Summary and Conclusion

The current WACE Music course is flawed. No course can go through such a protracted and convoluted creation process with constantly shifting goalposts, and maintain philosophical and structural integrity. The course is guided by a syllabus document is overly long and complicated. It has now been five years since its implementation and it could be realistically expected that by now, initial teething problems would have been sorted, and teachers would be comfortable delivering it. Despite this, and despite the lack of critical course dissection and discussion in Music, many WA teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the course. In particular, Music teachers indicate philosophical concerns over equity within the course, and more specific concerns over the framing of sections of the course, such as composition. These concerns were to a degree unexpected given the level of music teacher input into course redesign post 2005, and it is clear that concerns stem from the considerable influence the syllabus exerts over the pedagogical curriculum. The authors present this as evidence that WA music teachers on balance have intuitive misgivings with the WACE Music course and desire reform, but are not sure what should take its place. The authors contend that the first stage in addressing course concerns is to realise that as critical consumers and creators of curriculum, music teachers themselves must drive discussion and change. If not, they give tacet approval to the course in its current form. However, discourse needs to derive from an informed position, not one of vested interest or a desire for the past.

The informed music teacher voice becomes critical as WA embarks upon another round of course redesign to accommodate the requirements of the Australian Arts Curriculum. The danger for the WACE Music course is that yet another pedagogical and cultural layer is simply inserted into the existing syllabus, creating the potential for more dilution and confusion. Whatever shape the amended WACE course takes, reform needs a clear vision driven by the needs of the students and the subject, not educational ideology or political

pragmatism, and be underpinned by a unified and transparent philosophy which informs the entire course document, not just selected parts. The music education literature has built up a considerable body of knowledge relating to course design best practice, based upon wide ranging international experience; this body of knowledge needs to be front and centre in course design discourse. The desire for change exists within the WA music teaching community, as evidenced in the extended responses outlined in this article. Maybe it is time for the Music course designers in WA to go back to school and map the range of possibilities presented in the literature against the Australian Arts Curriculum before condemning Music teachers to yet another weighty, complex and potentially misguided tome.

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