

# Developing a Civics and Citizenship Program in your School

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In previous articles I have focused on meanings of Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE), some conundrums about the recent interest in CCE and most recently about national testing in CCE. Just a reminder about the latter – the

second national testing of grade 6 and year 10 students in CCE will take place in October this year. Your school may not be randomly selected by ACER as a participant school, however I urge you to look at the MCEETYA website – [www.mceetya.edu.au](http://www.mceetya.edu.au) – National Testing Program link for very useful examples of test items that you can use for CCE professional development in your school.

By now your school is well aware of the emphasis given to CCE in VELS. As a quick summary, CCE is not one of the six discipline-based learning areas, therefore it is not 'owned' by any one discipline, not even its traditional discipline home of Humanities. Rather it has been placed in the *Physical, Personal and Social Learning* strand outside of the disciplines. VELS also describes the domain of CCE as having two dimensions – *Civic knowledge & understanding* and *Community Engagement*. The expectation of schools is that, in developing CCE programs, CCE will be somehow be linked to *all* of:

- the other domains – Health and Physical Education, Interpersonal Development, Personal Learning in the Physical, Personal and Social Learning Strand
- the six discipline areas
- and the third Strand of Interdisciplinary Learning.

## What are the options for schools is to develop a process to incorporate all of this into existing programs?

In previous articles I have tried to discuss why I think assisting young people to be 'good citizens' is the central purpose of schooling and that the ways we organise our curriculum- usually via discipline studies – should support this goal. I take the view that SOSE/Humanities is in the

key position to take leadership of this emphasis on CCE, but not the sole owner of CCE. The Humanities is better positioned to take leadership of the Civics knowledge & understanding dimension – knowledge of *key concepts related to civic institutions and processes, government, law, identity, diversity, cohesion, common good and social justice*. These concepts would normally be covered in any case in many current Humanities programs. However, it is very clear from the data from the first national CCE testing that many students do not know about or understand what some people consider to be key civic concepts like democracy, compulsory voting and the meaning of Australia Day. The conclusion to be drawn from the testing is that these concepts are not being taught consistently across schools in Australia. We already know that the Federal Government has a view about essential civics' knowledge and that this will be reflected in both the forthcoming national curriculum and the new citizenship test.

## Developing CCE Programs in your school

### Step 1 Leadership

The starting point for schools to develop CCE program is for the SOSE/Humanities Department, in the context of VELS guidelines, to take leadership in articulating a *whole school community* response to what is essential learning in civics. Given that inevitably the final decision will be one of selection rather than everything, then school

communities have to decide, for example, the relative importance of knowing the meaning of stars on the Australian flag, skills for engaging in community activities and being able to utilise creative, investigatory and reflective processes.

This starting point of surveying all teachers, parents and students could well be a students' activity, perhaps through the SRC and/or through all year level SOSE/Humanities classes, so becoming a whole school activity which might take a whole semester to achieve. But what if there is great divergence of opinion?

In 2004 I conducted a research project while at Deakin University about school community perceptions – teachers, students and parents- about the attributes of a 'good citizen'. Surprisingly perhaps, all three cohorts had very similar ideas about essential civic knowledge, so I would not be anxious about the possibility of huge variations in ideas.

A compelling study in support of this school community approach is recent research by ACER (Thomson, 2004) that clearly showed that:

the strongest predictor of student level engagement was found to be school level engagement, that is, a school with a culture of participation of students, of teachers, of parents, of community, reflects back on individual students.

### Step 2 Audit

Drawing on the survey data and probably a final report compiled by the SOSE/Humanities Department presented to the School Council, currently curriculum programs need to be audited against the school community's 'wish list'. There are several issues here –

- What are the gaps?
- How can schools celebrate what they are already doing?
- Who will decide the specific curriculum location for any new civic knowledge?
- Which strand and/or discipline study will best cover the selected areas of civic knowledge?
- What will be the process of monitoring the application of the school community data to the current school program?

### Step 3: Whole School Approach

I have taken this curriculum approach to the initial development of a CCE program, because it is a practical approach, a not too time consuming activity and most importantly it models good democratic ideals. The diagram below indicates in the bottom LHS circle where this curriculum approach to CCE, or more accurately civics fits. However the diagram also then takes us into more complex and muddier waters by indicating that an effective approach to CCE in schools requires a *whole school approach*. My argument is that this whole school approach is an essential requirement for teaching and learning about *citizenship* – ie 'dispositions and skills for participation, understandings related to the attitudes, values, dispositions, beliefs, and actions that underpin

active democratic citizenship, that is, in VELs terms, Community Engagement. This approach also effectively fits with the goals of VELs as being: 'innovative, sustainable and building strong communities.'

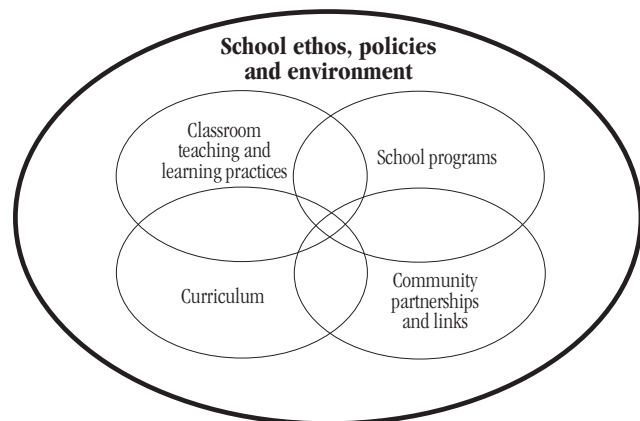
The identification of where notions of citizenship fit in to school programs are a much more complex issue than identifying the place of civics. For example, school mottos, school websites, school assemblies, school discipline policies and the nature of the relationships between school administration, teachers, students and parents, are all underpinned by a set of assumptions, values and beliefs. If citizenship is

about overlaying civic knowledge with a set of values beliefs and dispositions then individual members of school communities will inevitably come to their own personal judgments about the attributes of a 'good citizen'. Schools might use the nine values identified in the Values Education report. Schools might also engage the school community in another discussion about what they hope would be the citizen attributes of a graduate of their school. I have outlined what I think are these attributes in earlier articles in *Ethos*.

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### Step 4: Whole school Approach

I encourage school communities to play around with this diagrammatic tool to developing a whole school approach to CCE. For example, on reflection, I think that rather than using headings it might be better to rephrase the headings in to question form, for example, How is CCE currently linked to our school ethos, policies and environment?



Adapted from Holdsworth, R, (2000) *Discovery Democracy in Action*, Australian Youth Research Centre, Melbourne.

Strategies to auditing all five areas will vary, but I have seen some schools creating a number of school community committees to review current practices and policies. Some other schools have allocated an area to the School Council. Again the most effective and generative approach appears to be where all members of the school community are represented. Approaching the three areas of School ethos, policies and environment, School programs and Community partnerships and links is relatively easy if time consuming. The process is one of collecting data and auditing by labelling current activities. There is little judgement involved as mostly the task is one of building lists,

identifying gaps and celebrating the range of activities. My experience is that many members of school communities, including the Principal, don't know about the number and range of activities currently in school programs. What this process does, perhaps for the first time, is to articulate, label, link and acknowledge the existence of hitherto unconnected citizenship activities and policies. The articulation of a whole school community to an agreed set of citizenship dispositions provides a clear framework for deciding the nature and role of the three areas of school ethos, programs and community partnerships. It makes it easier for schools to decide if a current and/or new program/policy is relevant, consistent and valued. My experience is that schools do have a huge range of 'citizenship' activities but that these are rarely cohered under an explicit citizenship framework.

### Step 5: Classroom teaching Practices

I have left the one remaining area of classroom teaching and practices until last because it is often the one area that is fraught with personal anxieties. The identification of how a teachers' teaching and learning practice is consistent with a whole school articulated citizenship framework is both difficult to measure and monitor and also could be argued an infringement on teachers' professional integrity. I also need to say that I include the non-teaching staff, including the Principal, in this discussion. Let me say that I am not in support of the current debates about measuring teacher performance as they are currently argued. However I do support the idea of ensuring that teachers and the Principal model democratic citizenship values and dispositions. There is now a significant body of research that shows that in those schools and those classrooms where students are encouraged to practice democratic citizenship behaviours, then they are much more likely, in after school life, to be better informed and willing to actively engage in community activities. I don't have ready answers here but schools have to find a way to ensure teaching and learning practices model positive citizenship behaviours.

### School Programs

Below is some observations of how some schools are approaching the inclusion of CCE in their school programs. The list might be useful as a discussion starter in your school. It is a list but clearly some schools are combining many components. I welcome comments and ideas about what your school is doing.

- **VELS approach** – across school, drawing on all three strands.
- **SOSE/Humanities owned** – Specific strand 2 discipline based, eg topics on say local government, the law, etc.
- **A separate subject** – CCE is timetabled as a separate 'discipline'.
- **CCE as a process** – linked to Interdisciplinary Strand 3, inquiry based.
- **CCE as Strand 1** – focus on whole identity and well-being of student.
- **CCE within current school focus** – included in existing pastoral, mentoring, values, leadership programs.

- **CCE as a theme** – cross discipline approach eg. a local area study, rights and responsibilities.
- **CCE as iconic symbolism** – flying the flag, ANZAC day celebrations, singing the National Anthem.
- **CCE as activity focused** – a subtext of existing activities eg. SRC
- **CCE as special events** – explicitly linked to elections, Olympics, Tsunami.
- **CCE as partnerships** – linked to work experience, community service.
- **Ignore it – already do it** ... somewhere!

The approach taken by VELS clearly indicates that schools are encouraged to develop both the process and the CCE program to suit their individual school communities. In summary, here I am suggesting before you can develop a CCE program school communities need to clearly articulate what they think is a good citizen in the context of both their community and more global context. Another way that might assist you to articulate the good citizen is to think about describing what you think are the attributes of a graduate of your school, be it in grade 6 or year 12. Deakin University has already gone through this process and I notice that University of Melbourne has recently been describing the attributes of its graduates in the so-called Melbourne Model.

The second step is to audit current policies and practices according to this newly articulated list of attributes. I believe that students can be centrally involved in this auditing process. The above diagram can of assistance in reminding you about possible areas for consideration when undergoing an audit. The inclusion of a local government unit in grade 6 or year 9 is a cause for celebration, but if it is only one area in the total school program where CCE is taught then your school needs to consider broader possible areas.

The bottom line eventually is to evaluate if your programs and policies are making a difference. This can only be done if specific benchmarks/outcomes/attributes have been previously determined. Too often I hear of only feel good outcomes arising from say visits to a senior citizens centre, with little connection to the broader picture of how this fits into a whole school community definition of the good citizen.

All of this is both time consuming and challenging. But all schools are not starting from scratch and inventing some new subject. The process can be rewarding and the celebrations of existing good practice even more exciting.

I am happy to visit schools to work with you in undertaking this central purpose of schooling.

### References

- Holdsworth, R, (2000) *Discovery Democracy in Action*, Australian Youth Research Centre, Melbourne.
- Thompson, S (2004) *Report: Predictors of Student Engagement*, ACER publication