MLTAV CONFERENCE 2010

EDITED TRANSCRIPT OF NATIONAL CURRICULUM SESSION with

• John Firth (Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority – VCAA; Board Member, Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority – ACARA) and

• Angela Scarino (Lead Writer for Languages in the National Curriculum; Associate Professor, School of Communication, International Studies and Languages, University of South Australia)

ANGELA: ... as I was saying in an earlier session today, participation [in the National Curriculum consultation process] at this stage in particular, at this stage of development, is most fruitful if it is really focused on curriculum and certainly the surrounding implementation issues, but to keep those well apart in our minds, so that we do, in fact, have a curriculum conversation, a conversation that deals with teaching and learning of Languages to students in Primary and Secondary schools.

I think it is a massive opportunity that we have ... if I say where we are at the moment ... I have prepared an initial, partial draft [of the Shape Paper] as one or two of you would know already. This last week we have had that work looked at by an advisory group for Languages. For those of you who missed my earlier session [in the MLTAV Conference 2010 – for full details, refer Languages Victoria 1/2010], we have also set up an advisory group for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages. All Languages are coming together in one Shape Paper and so it is absolutely vital that people have a say as to how their Languages are represented. I was very, very concerned about that, so we have had some time in the past week just looking at my initial thoughts.

 Probably by the middle of August, the paper will go to a wider consultation and then towards the end of the year will be available for super-wide consultation. This is the process that ACARA has been using – normally inviting an academic to be the Lead Writer and then extensive consultation processes, as you know.

In the Languages area it is very difficult to talk about curriculum without recognising the place of Languages in the curriculum and the fragility that is also there and so I am certainly of the mind that we need to reframe Languages education. This is a golden opportunity; we cannot let it go. We have got to do some thinking, and thinking that reflects the diversity of learners and that also considers language learning and its distinctiveness. There is a section of the work that I am writing at the moment that deals with the distinctiveness of Languages as an area of the curriculum.

I will not describe to you how diverse our learners are; we know that they come with a diversity of home backgrounds and prior learning experiences that needs to be taken into account, so I will not dwell on that.
We also know that Languages are a ‘subject’, shall we say, in the curriculum, but they are a particular kind of subject because our ‘subject’ is practised by communities of speakers whose identity is defined by their language and so there is an emotional resonance always when we work in Languages. It is really important to recognise that, as a subject in the curriculum, as an area of learning, it is an area in its own right. Its setting is a whole community of speakers of that particular language.

Language is also a medium for learning and as Michael Halliday says, when children learn language, they are not simply engaging in one kind of learning, rather they are learning the foundation of learning itself. This is also the argument that we make about learning through language and the fact that Languages invite the learning of new stuff, if you like, through the curriculum. It is not just a rehash of old things. I am certainly trying to capture the distinctiveness in both of these senses – Languages and the communities of speakers of those Languages, also Languages as central to learning the language and learning through the language, regardless even of the kind of program that is being offered.

I can really only say these preliminary remarks; I won’t go into too much detail but simply invite you to respond, to participate. I hope that it is a genuine dialogue that is happening here. I also invite you to reconsider [your views about Languages education] because if we say more of the same, then why are we actually bothering? So the real debate is going to be about how much change is good change, just now for our particular area, and certainly I know there are lots of ideas in town about that. I hope that we can make some significant change, such that Languages have a strong place in the educational experience of students. Thank you.

JOHN: Thanks, Andrew, thank you for the invitation [to speak at the conference]. I would like to remark about your dedication at quarter past four on a Friday and I am conscious that we stand between you and the [MLTAV Awards Cocktail Party] drinks, so – look to make it interactive, I will speak for two minutes to back up basically what Angela is saying – from my ACARA perspective mainly, which is to say that we are embarking in this second group of curriculum areas, Languages, Geography and the Arts, following the first four. We have got drafts; they are out for consultation at the moment. We are conscious now that ACARA has been given the remit to provide advice to Ministers for the whole of the curriculum, so it is the relationship between each of the Learning Areas and the whole and cross-curriculum perspectives as well as general capabilities which are now in play in a more substantial way than they were before [with the first group of curriculum areas]. I mean, when the original National Curriculum project under the National Curriculum Board started, the remit was simply to develop Maths, History and Science. The Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians is the core policy framing document within which all of our work is taking place.

Now all of you in the room have been party to some of the rich and rewarding tapestry of Languages curriculum development in various ways over the years and we are looking forward to it immensely. There are huge challenges. I do not need to outline those for you; I just say, again as a Board member, and someone on the Curriculum Committee which is overseeing this, that it seems to me that given the many different views that there are, and the many different ways we could develop curriculum in this area, (it is also true of some of the others and it is equally true of the Arts in its own way) – as we are getting into the second and third phase Learning Areas, they are more complex and there are a wider range of views; there is not an agreed settlement about purpose, rationale, intentions and so on. I think it is important very early on in the process, to get advice and develop clear ideas about purpose and rationale which will then underpin the way in which we go. I do not mean to imply that there is a single purpose and a single rationale, but we must identify those that are important
and the relative weighting of those [purposes and rationales] and the implications for curriculum design in following one or more of these statements of purpose and rationale.

There are some unique structural issues to developing curriculum in Languages that Angela alluded to, but most obviously you know it won’t be sufficient simply to say, as we have in the first four [Learning Areas], (because that was the remit from Ministers): ‘Here is some content, here are some achievement statements from Prep-10’. [For Languages] there are multiple pathways; there are multiple capacities of people coming to Languages at various points and again I agree with Angela, you do not want to have your thinking constrained overly at the start by provision questions. But at some point reality will intrude and so, at what point and in what way? Just to finish my opening remarks, I would reiterate Angela’s point that this is not an exercise as Australian Curriculum generally, Languages in particular, but it applies to all Learning Areas ... this is not an exercise in tidying up what we currently have. If you just get a Committee to go away and do that, you would not bother with all of the massive consultations and development exercises. It is really to say, ‘Here is a 21st Century Australian Curriculum, it has got to be world-class, it has got to be forward looking, it’s not simply tidying up what we currently do’.

If there is a view that what we currently do is probably not quite cutting edge, then this is an opportunity to get it there and relate what we do to our purposes and rationale. With those opening remarks, Andrew, I would be happy to pass over to comments and questions.

ANDREW FERGUSON (MLTAV President and host of discussion): Thank you very much, John. Not all of you were at Angela’s session this afternoon so one of the things that occurred to me, and perhaps it is worth a discussion between John and Angela, if they are willing to do so, is our VELS for example at the moment is organised in groupings of languages and Angela’s current thinking is around specific language curricula. Perhaps that is worth some comment from both of you, if you would?

ANGELA: Yes, I think that I have long held the position, (for the last twenty years) that in order to be able to deal with the diversity of Languages we have taken a generic framework approach. In so doing, teachers have had to do a double round of re-interpretation, in order to be able to make the frameworks meaningful in the work that you are doing in classrooms. There is a lot that happens in that particular translation. Furthermore, nobody speaks a generic language and therefore it is very difficult to describe achievements in a generic language. We know that there are huge differences between what can be achieved in say French, and what can be achieved in Chinese. Not because of anything to do with education of the students, but to do with the nature of the Languages themselves. I think that if we are talking seriously about achievements, and my current work in a project on student achievements, (trying to look at ways of describing student achievements at the exit of Primary, at the exit of Year 10 and at the exit of Year 12, relative to time-on-task and learner background), tells me that we have just got to look more seriously at language-specific work and that is the way to go, if we want to deal with the notion of achievement in a serious way.

Why do we want to deal with achievements in a serious way? Because ACARA wants to deal with achievements, but also because for a long time, in our field in particular, we have not had a reasonable way of describing student achievements and therefore the default position is native speaker. So we have had parents and members of the community saying to us: ‘Well, my child has been learning Chinese for two years and cannot even order a cup of tea’ ... you know, those kinds of remarks come from using a native speaker as a reference point. That is not an appropriate reference point for Languages learning in schools, but it means we have a challenge to find ways that describe those achievements more effectively in Chinese, in German, in the particular Languages, because they are different.
JOHN: Well, I would agree with what Angela said, but I would have to say, Andrew, that in Victoria the VELS is where we have the [Languages grouping] structures and of course in the VCE we have 46 separate curricula and they are written for each of the Languages and that is certainly the early thinking that’s occurring in ACARA, that in fact, whilst there will be a Shape Paper which describes the Languages area rationale and so on and broad high-level things that are common to language learning in whatever Language, that, as ACARA is explicitly concerned with standards, you actually write standards in Languages, you do not write them in groups. So the one caveat on that, well not a caveat, is just to say that ACARA is unlikely ever to publish 46 national Languages curricula, so the question will then be, having conceptually what Angela said is the way to go, it does bring into play which Languages, and I know this is an issue you all love to talk about, which ones get ‘privileged’, (in inverted commas), what is the ‘limit’ in a sense, for those that will be written at a national level and what does that mean for State and Territory provision?

ANGELA: And we need also to say that for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages it is likely that there will be a framework for those, because again, there are diverse Languages but there are different stages too of documentation, there is Reclamation work that is really important for those particular Languages and so those sets of considerations need to be taken into account. But I am really, really excited about the fact that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people we have consulted with, have said that they wish to be part of a one Shape Paper and I think that is a fabulous notion and all the consultations so far, and there have been quite a lot with that particular group, have been really, really positive.

ANDREW: Thank you very much, and can we throw it open if you [session participants] have some questions, please? Perhaps if we do not concentrate on implementation at this stage; there will be a whole lot of questions about how we are going to do this but at the moment we are looking at the conceptual side of things. Over here, you have got a question?

QUESTION 1: It is interesting what you said. I have just one question. I have a concern - is Auslan involved in these 46 Languages that you talk about, diverse Languages? The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, you say they have their own diverse languages. Is Auslan going to be included, because we have our own sign language as well? The Victorian School of Languages does not have Auslan. I thought that was really strange and disappointing personally; they have a long list of all these other Languages, but Auslan is not there. I want to make sure that Auslan is included.

ANGELA RESPONSE: There is no further comment really to make. I take that as a comment and not as a question, that our colleague has an expectation that Auslan is part of the work that we are doing. It has certainly been part of the discussions and there is an awareness of that, but certainly there has been no work on which Languages we will have.

JOHN RESPONSE: I might take this as an opportunity to make the general point about the 46 Languages that I referred to. These are the 46 Languages that the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority [VCAA] offers at the VCE level and whatever happens in national curriculum will have no direct impact on whether we offer those Languages or not. We already have an in-principle decision that in Victoria we would proceed with offering the range of Languages that we currently do, subject only to our national policy about Languages which are in more or less terminal decline ... occasionally, if Languages slip below fewer than 15 enrolments throughout Australia for three years in a row, (it does not happen very often but occasionally it does) ... but other than that, we have no intention of reducing the number of Languages that are available in the VCE and, in fact, we are still in the process of occasionally adding to them, as the community language bases change.
ANDREW: Thank you, John. We need to recognise that in Victoria this is a huge commitment by the VCAA and that we are very lucky as a State to have a curriculum authority that is willing to make that commitment. That is not common across the country, as I understand it.

QUESTION 2: I am mindful that you do not want to talk about how we are going to develop this, however, I am also mindful of what you said, both of you, about what we are going to develop and my colleagues at my school who have the subjects in the first stage of the National Curriculum have made comments about what is in there, in terms of content and they comment that it is really very, very New South Wales-centric. My comment is that I do not want the Languages curricula to be New South Wales-centric; I want it to have a broad base, please.

JOHN RESPONSE: I do not think I can see the premise on which the question is based; it might be an observation, and one of the interesting questions, as we are in consultation mode at the moment for English, Maths, History and Science, is that of course the format and the structure is unfamiliar. It is actually unfamiliar to virtually everyone in the country, including New South Wales teachers, who do not actually see much New South Wales in it.

So it is one of the issues when you move from eight States and Territories with their own idiosyncratic development of how, (not the what), but just the how curriculum is set out, and how it is structured, to a national common curriculum which is different from all of them. What is difficult sometimes to disentangle, (and what we are trying to do with this consultation process), is to disentangle the changes that appear to be there because of format or design decisions that have been taken, as opposed to the specific content. To the extent to which people see derivation or sources of some of those things, that may or may not be interesting ... the question is, is it what we want as we are developing Australian Curriculum, regardless of its source?

It is a tricky question, I know, because your reference point is what you currently do. What you like and what you do not like about what you currently do will inform largely your response to a draft of something new. So it is a hard task to actually say, ‘What I see here is substantially different or it is possibly similar. but I cannot really tell’. One of the requests that I think was legitimately made during the first round consultation, and hopefully the subsequent areas will benefit from this, is for ACARA to develop greater clarity about its own design. I think that when you go across the four [first phase Learning Areas] that are currently on the website, you will see quite a few incongruities amongst the four. One of the questions that has already come up is for ACARA to develop a slightly more consistent approach to design, without being overly mechanistic, because actually you tend to write mass curriculum, in some ways, a bit differently from Languages and History and so on, but it has to be similar enough for people to see what the common features of the design are. Angela is not from NSW and the reference group and advisory group aren’t all from there, and the various people we will be consulting with come from all around the country and there is a challenge in the logistics of this. So we are using as much online consultation as we can, but recognising that people will need to be involved in face-to-face discussions as well.

RESPONSE ANGELA: Can I also say that we have had quite a culture in Languages curriculum, a culture of national collaboration. We have already got Year 12 sharing of syllabuses and assessment, which is quite unheard of in some other quarters.

JOHN: Every other quarter!

ANGELA: And we have also had an immense amount [of collaboration] under the previous Languages plan, the Statement and Plan for Languages; we have had an enormous amount of
national collaborative work and so I am really conscious of that obviously. I have been a participant in it and so you might say, oh well you know, it is very prominent in your mind and less so in ours. I do not know, but I think that the national nature of our work will also carry things forward, hopefully. By all means, use your voices and that is why the MLTAs’ efforts in uniting people for the purpose of commentary and so on, is going to be fantastic.

QUESTION 3: My question is kind of related to that. When the VELS were introduced, we were told that there would be teacher consultation and it was very hard to know as a teacher what that actually meant. I know we were shown drafts and we had a chance to comment. I know I made comments and then it [the VELS] disappeared and suddenly it comes back to you and it is done. We do not really know how our voices feature in the consultation process. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about what kind of voice we will have and what kinds of opportunities there will be for us to really have our voices heard for the National Curriculum.

ANGELA RESPONSE: Well in terms of, and John might be able to say more, but in terms of the consultation process, it is extensive. The fact that it is online means that absolutely everybody can have a say. Your question is an important one and it pertains to any consultation whatsoever. I am of the view that curriculum is the kind of thing that you cannot actually subject to a vote, for example. You cannot say: ‘Shall we vote this in or that in’, but it is more through dialogue, consensus and talking and so on. It could well be that a particular view that an individual holds does not find its place, but then you know, there has got to be dialogue to develop as much common understanding as we can and the recognition that these processes are necessarily complex. Again, I think that there is some convergence, because we have been talking together nationally around collaborative work for a long time. So I do have confidence that intervention is possible and peoples’ views will be heard. Not everything can be taken into account, because let me tell you there will be 10,000 different views.

QUESTION 3 (continued): Will it be before or after the draft? I just want to know the actual process – it is not transparent to us from where we are, so...

ANGELA: Oh, I see. Well, for Languages the process began last October. There was an advisory group, an expert group set up to canvass the range of issues that should be considered. Out of a period of discussion by that reference group, or advisory group, certain positions were put to the Board, to the Curriculum Committee and the Board, of which John is a member. That consideration by the Board then gave, if you like, the instructions, the positions that needed to be incorporated into this initial advice. It is called initial advice, it is not called a Shaping Paper yet, it is called initial advice as Lead-Writer; I will be writing initial advice. There is, as I have mentioned in an earlier session today, an advisory group, an expert group, who again are informing that work and there is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander group informing that work. After that, in mid-August I understand, there will be a consultation, by invitation, with all stake holders, something like 150 people. That will lead to a revision of the document and then after that, through the process of ACARA itself, endorsement by the Curriculum Committee and the Board. It then goes out to public consultation.

RESPONSE: Thank you very much.

JOHN: Can I just then add a little bit, because this is a key question and it is a key challenge in national consultation, in national development, because each jurisdiction has its own established processes and networks and people feel some sort of connection (by and large a positive one), but sometimes people have mixed views about that. So the national consultation, I will just take the first four Learning Areas documents as an example, that are coming to a close on the 30th of May, they have been out for consultation since February on the website. The last I heard, there were 40,000 people who had registered as potential
respondents and, of course, there are key stakeholder meetings in groups of jurisdictions preparing advice at the moment.

ACARA has commissioned an expert body, a third party, to analyse all of the feedback and to provide reports to the Board about the nature of responses to all of the questions ... quantitative, in terms of what is the range of responses and linking them to where they came from – the sources, whether they were individual teachers, schools, peak bodies, whatever, jurisdictions and so on ... qualitative as well, analysis through using key words. There is quite sophisticated software available now, where qualitative comments that people put in can be analysed and grouped and an analysis of that be given. That feeds into the process. What ACARA has undertaken, and what it did with the initial Shape Papers, is to report back to everybody what happened to the draft as a result of the consultation, so a summary of the key elements that were identified in the consultation process, so probably not 10,000 individual ones, but detailed analysis of who said what in relation to each of the four Learning Areas and then the ACARA response.

As Angela indicated, it could be that 25 bodies said this, we took it into account but decided not to accept it because of some other countervailing view; the intention is to do justice to the people who take the time to provide feedback and to explain the nature of the feedback, the consideration the Board ultimately took making the links to the documents to say this is where it changed, or this is where it didn’t. We can provide a loop back into that process.

As far as Languages are concerned, Angela led us up to the Shape Paper that will then be up for public consultation. That is not the curriculum. That is the architecture of the curriculum. That is where we will say, we think we have got a good first working draft now of our understanding of the Languages curriculum in the Australian curriculum and what it is going to mean for the 21st century and we want feedback on that. We will go through that similar process, provide the analysis of the feedback and then produce a position and from there, the writers’ instructions in 2011. The writers will then get down to work based on the feedback from the Shape Paper. Then we go through the process of developing the curriculum and responding to the draft on that. So there are at least three further stages to go, in potential input and feedback from whatever level, as an individual, as a member of a school, as a member of an organisation, as a peak body and all of those in various combinations. We have got a strong commitment to this [process] and the Board is reviewing the process all of the time, wanting to make sure that we do justice to the statements that we have made. We are asking for substantial involvement and people have got to see that that is worthwhile.

ANDREW: Just time wise, I am sorry we do need to finish up. Angela is certainly around for a bit longer, so please take the opportunity to talk with her. I would just like to say, on behalf of the MLTAV, that I think we all admire your personal commitment and the work that you are putting in to giving us what we hope will be a really high quality national Languages curriculum for Australia for the first time. It is a huge exercise and it requires these people, I think, to stretch their personal resources in an incredible way, given the timelines that have been put around this. We do very much appreciate your commitment to that. Thank you, John and Angela. We have a small gift for both of you. We are still at the early stages of the languages curriculum so BE INVOLVED!