

New curriculum in Science and Social Studies—Notes from the inside

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Enthusiasm, but with reservations, characterized the take on the draft curriculum in Science and Social Studies by two BCTF members who were a part of the initial Ministry curriculum committees.

Dale Martelli is the president of the Social Studies Provincial Specialist Association, and teaches at Vancouver Technical Secondary School. Nancy McAleer is a Science teacher from Sooke and was a BCTF appointee to the Science committee.

They participated in a BCTF seminar on curriculum that was available throughout the province in early April on livestream, a computer-based feed. The full seminar is archived and available on bctf.ca.

Exciting possibilities in the new curriculum

Both Martelli and McAleer found the process with the curriculum committee to be an exceptionally positive experience. They worked with diverse teams of teachers from around the province who teach at different levels, mostly in public schools but also in private schools. The teams also included teachers with an Aboriginal perspective. The Ministry staff members working with the committees were positive in wanting to engage with teachers in creating something new.

The enthusiasm is based on the curriculum being developed on a “bottom-up,” not a “top-down”, basis. The openness to something new was symbolized by a Ministry staffer picking up a physical copy of the existing Social Studies curriculum and removing it from the meeting room.

More teacher autonomy to make decisions on content and pedagogical approaches replaces lists of instructional objectives. “It represents respect for the creativity of teachers,” Martelli said. “We are being given space to take things in directions we think important.”

Teachers freed up in the draft curriculum

Martelli described the draft Socials curriculum as the first fundamental change in approach for at least 40 years, from what existed when he was a student. Broad topics are moved down a year so; for example, Canadian history would be a Grade 10 focus rather than Grade 11. That in itself may provide some logistical issues.

The most important change, though, is freeing up teachers to define their approach within a broad framework. The teacher’s background and strengths will be significant; for example, choosing to utilize cultural geography or another approach if that is their enthusiasm. The students’ reality should also be reflected in the topics and approaches, linking community and global aspects of that reality.

A common methodological element in the Social Studies draft is a focus on inquiry, as well as on exploring multiple ways that an historical event or social theme may be seen—an approach that reflects a diverse and multicultural society. That is in contrast to the current textbooks that are built on a grand narrative approach to history. It is important to understand and debate the

philosophies of how we understand history, and other aspects of Socials, as a part of developing a deeper approach to curriculum than in the past.

McAleer said a focus of the curriculum draft in Science is on place-based learning that is relevant to students in their own communities. There is room for student inquiry, giving students more of a sense of direction in their own learning. More student engagement should produce a deeper understanding.

McAleer responded to a concern that has been raised about lack of environmental education as a significant part of the new curriculum, as reflected in the drafts that are online. As one example of how the environment is incorporated, she said that a major theme in Grade 9 will be on the carbon cycle, helping students to understand inter-relationships between human activity and the environment.

McAleer said she could understand concerns of those who look at what is online on the Ministry website: “When you see something that looks like a skeleton, people look and say there is nothing there. In the past when curriculum was revised, you saw a fully-developed product. Now what you see is a work in development.”

The draft on the Ministry website only shows the top level of the proposals. It is really a table of contents, without deeper, more-concrete elements. Examples of what different elements might look like in a classroom context were developed by the committee, and they were supposed to be available as well. When the full details are available, it will be easier to understand what is being proposed.

The structure of the new curriculum is to be interlinked, online, rather than a single dimension that can be presented in print. Without seeing these other levels, teachers examining the draft don’t get a full picture of what is intended.

It is important, as well, to know that the intention is for a place-based focus, and that teachers would have extensive autonomy to bring an environmental focus to all aspects of their programs.

Both McAleer and Martelli emphasized that the process being followed is different from all past curriculum development in BC. Formerly, a curriculum would be complete when it was introduced, and there would be an implementation schedule.

This time we are observers—and hopefully active participants as well—in creating the curriculum as an ongoing and, yes, a messy process. The curriculum will not be a document frozen in print, but will develop and evolve continuously, with the intent of offering a high-quality, rigorous, but also flexible, education.

This is a grand vision; what may be obstacles to its success?

It’s scary, both McAleer and Martelli agree. If we are really going to have the autonomy to shape the curriculum for our students, that is a lot of responsibility. It requires us to think deeply about our students and the community, the purpose of what we are doing, and what we bring to the classroom as teachers. The new curriculum will not be a recipe book, but rather an evolving framework for our work in teaching.

Dangers that could derail the new curriculum

To be successful in the transition, teachers will have significant needs. Development must be slow enough that resources are created and shared. It will require significant funding from the Ministry for in-service to help shift pedagogical practices and provide new resources.

Hands-on activities and project-based learning will also require funding for teaching materials. Changes in the grade-level of topics will require moving books and other resources, sometimes between schools.

McAleer and Martelli identified a number of other factors that could also derail the new curriculum as initially developed.

The assessment approach could lead in very different directions. The curriculum committees were given the task of development without knowing what the assessment approach would be. As is obvious, assessments will direct what actually happens in classrooms, if they don't reflect the approach of the new curriculum. Assessment directions are still a mystery.

“Core competencies” are defined by the Ministry as being “at the centre of the redesign of curriculum and assessment.” A general description of these is on the website at <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/competencies>. These are being developed in more detail through a process separate from the curriculum committees, under contract with an external consultant. Teachers are engaged in this process in some districts, but not all. Competencies are intended to be cross-curricular. It is difficult to identify the impact until more details are available.

The Graduation Program is another mystery. It is another part of the overall design that needs to be developed. The curriculum currently up for review is just for K to Grade 9. A grad committee to advise on the model that the grad years should take is just beginning to meet. This small group involves BCTF members as well as members representing other areas, such as independent schools and administrators.

The grad program is a reflection of what the province considers to be the overall expectation of what it means to be an educated person. The graduation requirements could have a significant impact on the curriculum as a whole, leaving much less scope for teacher autonomy than is present in the curriculum drafts.

The current K–9 curriculum drafts could undergo changes depending on the direction of the grad program.

Join the conversation

You can see the full hour of discussion on the BCTF YouTube channel at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cdanEIKQeM&feature=youtu.be>

You are also invited to join the BCTF conversation on the curriculum discussion board in the BCTF member portal, <https://bctf.ca/myBCTF/DiscussionBoard.aspx>

The draft curriculum is on the Ministry website at <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/curriculum>, and you can complete the web-based questionnaire at: <https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/feedback>.

Curriculum redesign is being discussed at the #bccurric twitter hashtag.