

Section 3: Action in education for wetlands

Controversy in the classroom — the Boondall wetlands issue

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Abstract

The Boondall wetlands development project seemed an ideal focus for a critical teaching experiment in a Brisbane primary school. Sixty-five students in an ungraded Years 4/5/6 classroom were introduced to the processes of critical investigation and decision making, and applied these to an extensive study of the Boondall project. Their experiences included the study of print, graphic and video materials related to the issue, a visit to the site, and discussions with conservationists and a local alderman. Eventually, groups formed according to the final decision made, and presentation of each case was planned. Throughout, special sessions encouraged students to reflect upon the nature of controversy, the process of investigation, and the quality of decision making.

The idea

This project grew out of a shared belief that primary school kids could do more than was usually asked of them at school. We both felt that conventional social studies programs tended to be too safe and uncontroversial; that they shied away from topics that were touchy, and from approaches that were critical. On the positive side, we believed that young school children could engage in sustained, critical investigation of problematic issues. We even believed that they might enjoy the experience.

Our purpose was clear. Given the ominous problems of the modern world — at every level from the interpersonal to the global, and in every sphere of human activity — the need for citizens to be actively involved in appropriate social reconstruction seemed obvious and pressing. Helping prepare young people to be capable of critical investigation, reflection, decision-making and action seemed essential. Such an aim located our approach within the broad framework of critical teaching. Essentially, critical teaching involves encouraging students to challenge taken-for-granted realities, to scrutinise and evaluate orthodoxies, to assess possible alternatives. It stands in contrast to the transmissive style of schooling, where students accept, passively and unquestioningly, the beliefs of the dominant ideology, usually treated as unproblematic and 'objective'.

The school setting

Craigslea State School, located at West Chermide, Brisbane, caters for about 600 students in Years 1-7. Predominantly, the students live in middle class nuclear families. This project involved 65 students in an ungraded Years 4/5/6 group, with three teachers — Ros McDonald, Peter Marcon and Jean Knight. The class

has only been formed this year. The social groupings within the class are generally positively supportive and tolerant of each others' abilities and interests, but include the usual exclusive play groupings.

Each of the three teachers has a philosophy that all students should be expected to develop a minimum level in all skills which have personal and social value, and also should be encouraged to strive to reach the highest level possible in their areas of special aptitude. The teachers try to relate with the children in encouraging, supportive ways, and to develop confidence and self esteem.

The curriculum stresses individual differences in learning rates and developmental levels, and emphasises process in literature, writing, drama, art and media studies. The modern building, including two double teaching spaces, is ideal for separate work areas, and there is abundant parent help, often quite specialised.

As a focus for study, the Boondall wetlands looked ideal. The issue was topical and controversial. There was plenty of evidence available. The site itself was only fifteen minutes away by bus. People actively involved in the issue were available. Here was the chance to make learning vital, alive and personally meaningful; to focus on critical thinking; and to incorporate the various components of the curriculum.

The program

The first session set the scene. Through examples rooted in their own school lives, students were introduced to the idea of controversy, and to the process of decision making. The values bases of decisions were highlighted. Then, the Boondall controversy itself was introduced. The complexity of the issue was made obvious. Students were encouraged to suspend their judgements, to avoid hasty and under-informed decisions.

Subsequent sessions involved investigation of aspects of, and arguments about the issue. Aspects included the existing features of the area, the ecological significance of the wetlands, specific details of the development project, and arguments put forward by the developers, the Brisbane City Council, the Bramble Bay Consultative Committee and other critics. The students studied letters, newspapers, photographs, official brochures, maps and a commercial television current affairs segment. With each, the stress was on evaluating the evidence, investigating its value base, its selectivity, its persuasive technique. Students were encouraged to ask questions of the evidence, rather than just answer questions about it.

We felt that there was a tendency by some students to form fixed opinions too quickly. A special session was held to highlight the folly of making a firm judgement on the basis of a simple experience. Students readily challenged the validity of a reported comment that "Craigslea is a bad school. I drove past one day and saw two boys fighting". Similarly they recognised the problems with the claim that "I had a Papa Guiseppes frozen pizza last night. It tasted awful. I think everyone

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should be told that those pizzas are no good". With the former comment, students proposed a plan of investigation by which a more valid impression of the school might be gained. As well, they suggested that, even with lengthy investigation, different observers might come to conflicting conclusions, because of different criteria reflecting different values. Both analogous situations confirmed the points made in the first session of the study — that decisions should be based on comprehensive and protracted investigation; that single episodes can be unrepresentative and misleading; that decisions reflect individual values.

A key component of the study was the all-day visit to the site. Here, local activists helped. Two student groups were formed, alternating activities during the day. While one group completed field sketching from a headland, studied an existing marina, and visited the fishing co-op, (all with associated talks and discussion), the other group trekked through the wetland itself, studying the significant natural features. In particular, the mangroves were explained — their need for fresh water and oxygen, their role in the breeding and feeding cycle of fish and crabs. As well, the already visible impact of human activity on the area was highlighted — polluted water and shoreline, dumped rubbish, dirtied sand, drainage constructions. Lunch time was spent at the Boondall Entertainment Centre — the first large structure in the area, and a centrepiece of the overall development plan. Three video crews, in which all students took turns, recorded the day's activities.

Back at school, there were follow-up visits during the next week by two conservationists and a City Council alderman from the ruling Liberal Party.

About seven weeks had elapsed since the study began. Students were encouraged to make decisions about the project. The class split into three fairly equal groups — for the project, against, and 'others'. Amongst the 'others' there was a division between those who were still undecided, and those who favoured a compromise plan of development. Interestingly, many students admitted to having changed their minds at one or more times during the study. In particular, the site visit seemed crucial for many. Some, finding the wetlands unattractive, tended to become less concerned about the preservation of the area. Others, intrigued by the ecological significance of all that mud, mangrove and marsh, became more adamant in their opposition to the proposed development.

A fascinating insight into the impact of the whole study came during one discussion session. The question 'How has this study been different from others you've done at school?' elicited the following responses:

- 'We're learning about something for which there's no right or wrong answer'
- 'We're talking about something that normally only our parents talk about'
- 'We've been able to visit the place, and to talk to people who are involved in the issue'
- 'We don't have to agree with what our teachers think'.

In relation to the last response, a subsequent question drew the comment that the teachers were interested in 'how we made our decision' rather than in the decision itself.

At the time of writing, the project is incomplete. The students, grouped by type of decision made, are planning final presentations. Using drama, song, speeches, poems, art and video excerpts, each group is to try to convince an audience of parents, students and others that its decision is the best one for Boondall

Implications

In terms of our original purpose, we are fairly happy. The quality of discussion, debate and writing seems to confirm our belief that most young people of this age are ready and able to engage in critical investigation of controversial social issues. Of course, there were problems. In particular, there was the tendency of many kids to believe what they see and hear, especially if the medium is glossy and/or official. As well, some students tended to make firm decisions about the issue too soon — even though they perceived the folly of such premature decisions in more immediate analogous situations. Still, given the pressing orthodoxy of most of their previous and continuing schooling, such an uncritical and unreflective attitude is hardly surprising. At least, we seem to be developing the beginnings of a critical perspective in many of the students.

In terms of the specific environmental issue, our feelings are mixed. There is no doubt that most of the students understood the significance of the area. However, some seemed to find it hard to 'feel for' the area because of its harsh beauty. It seems that an over-rich experience of lush domestic lawns, breathtaking scenic sites and wondrous television vistas has confirmed a very selective definition of beauty. Further, the common equation of 'beauty' and 'worth' seems to have made it hard for some young people to really take to heart (and not just to mind) the worth of the Boondall wetlands, and the consequent need for their preservation.