EDSS428 – Assessment 1

Critical Essay on Teaching Humanities

A varying degree of attention is placed on Humanities at different levels of the curriculum however it is nevertheless relevant, and more so vital in the overall education of our students (MCEETYA, 2008; Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2012). As a content area primarily focused on preparing students for becoming informed citizens and participants of society, it has the potential to fulfil the need to educate our students in reflection of the needs of society and the environment (Reynolds, 2012; Myers, 2008). Discussed in this essay is the importance of Humanities in the primary school, its connection with values education, the personal and intellectual development of children and pedagogical approaches to effectively teach Humanities. In addition, selected implications within these topics will be considered and addressed.

Throughout Reynolds’ Teaching History, Geography & SOSE in the Primary School, it is emphasised that the aim of Humanities is to educate students to become informed and active citizens (2012). Likewise this aim stands as one of the key goals for Australian schooling as determined in the Melbourne Declaration of Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008). In this simple comparison it is revealed that The Humanities is quite clearly one of the most important aspects to the education of our students. Reitano and Bourke (2009) affirm that History in particular “fulfils a social function, providing a framework for teaching young people about their place in the world” (p.1). Alongside this goal, Australian schooling should aim to promote equity and excellence, as well as producing successful learners and confident and creative individuals (MCEETYA, 2008). Each of these can be addressed through the content and delivery of the Humanities.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (2012) identifies History as one of the four key Learning Areas, alongside Literacy, Mathematics and Science. The Australian Victorian and Essential Learning Standards (VCAA, 2012) on the other hand recognises The Humanities, one broader area further defining three discipline-based learning areas to be taught – Economics, Geography and History. Each of these subject areas holds an importance in the development of students’ awareness, knowledge and ability of and to act appropriately and resourcefully within society, ensuring them to be intertwined with one another. In discussing History, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2012) states that “historical knowledge is fundamental to understanding ourselves and others” (para.1). It encourages students to understand societies, how the
world was and therefore why it is how it is in the present day. Subsequently Economics allows us to
further teach about the interaction and actions of individuals, focusing on equipping students with the
“knowledge and skills to engage with economic matters” rationally and ethically for the better of
themselves and the wider society (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2012, para.4).
Alongside each of these subsections of Humanities Geography aims to produce empowered people to
make positive contributions to the environment and its sustainability. It aims to achieve this through
an inquiry approach, addressing why the environment is how it is in areas, considering natural and
human impact (Reynolds, 2012; VCAA, 2012). Furthermore History, Geography and SOSE together
address the three cross-curriculum perspectives declared by the Australian Curriculum, Assessment
and Reporting Authority (2012): Indigenous perspectives, Sustainability and, Asia and Australia’s
engagement with Asia.

In conjunction with the teaching of History, Geography and SOSE comes values education – an
explicitly and implicitly taught area embedded within all aspects of schooling (Reynolds, 2012).
Values education provides specific attention to facilitating our students’ awareness, knowledge and
application of socially apt morals, decisions, and behaviours (Reynolds, 2012). It is one of the most
important facets in teaching our students, with the MCEETYA acknowledging “that education is as
much about building character as it is about equipping students with specific skills” (Department of
Education, Science and Training, 2005, p.1). In addition the MCEETYA further expresses that it
“helps students exercise ethical judgment and social responsibility” (DEST, 2005, p.1). Here, the
connection of values education with Humanities is evident, with the previous brief descriptions of
each Humanities subsection and with the definitive goal of Humanities being to create informed and
active citizens. The relationship with History in particular is clear as the VCAA states that History
“promotes debate and encourages thinking about human values, including present and future
challenges” (2012, para.1).

Reynolds (2012) provides a rich description of the connection between values education and the
Humanities, expressing the essentiality of values education “to the inquiry approach and citizenship
focus” of the Humanities subjects “both as an object of study” and “an approach to the study” (p.122).
Similarly, AusVELS describes the Humanities as taking human behaviour as their subject matter
(Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, 2012). With human behaviour based upon the
values of the individual and society it can further be appreciated the fundamental basis of which
values education is to Humanities. To demonstrate this relationship between values education and
Humanities further, it is important to consider the mode and method in which Humanities is best taught to students.

The personal and intellectual development of each individual child can depend on an array of factors. These include contextual influences such as those articulated in Bronfenbrenner’s social ecological model: the child’s characteristics, family, school, and peers, amongst other interactions with community bodies (Bowes, Grace, & Hayes, 2009). Bowes, Watson, and Pearson (2009) inform that families play a “critical role in instilling fundamental values in children” which enable them “to become ethical and law-abiding citizens” (p.91). This is supported by Halstead and Taylor (2009) who determine that many values are learnt within the first two years of a person’s life, influenced by the family and community. When the child progresses to school, the school sequentially plays a major role in the development of values, through modelling and school practices, to explicit teaching of values within the classroom. This shows that values education can assist in creating a safe and challenging learning environment – S5

Additional factors impacting on the personal and intellectual development are those specific to the child such as learning styles (visual, verbal, and kinaesthetic), personal experiences, and level of meta-cognition (McInerney & McInerney, 2010). More so, both personal and intellectual developments are interdependent, each playing a significant role upon the other. Personal learning and the social world of students is a major contributor to the cognitive development of children. This influence of social interaction on learning is referred to as social constructivism and “comes about as learners become encultured into the knowledge and symbols of their society” (McInerney & McInerney, 2010, p.4). Piaget initially established the concept of children’s development based on the view that they construct their own understanding through relating action and thought, awareness of cognition, and self-regulation (Arrington, 2008; McInerney & McInerney, 2012). Vygotsky however progressed on this addressing that children learn through socialisation and cultural influences (McInerney & McInerney, 2010). Vasque (as cited in McInerney & McInerney, 2010) more explicitly described that students will learn through interaction in their social environment, acquiring new “ideas, language, values, and dispositions of the social group” (p.53).

In describing good teaching practices McInerney and McInerney (2010) place significance upon the teacher’s knowledge skills and questioning skills. Coinciding with this, Reynolds (2012) states that “good pedagogy in History, Geography and SOSE include inquiry approaches with a strong values
focus in authentic civic situations” (p.23). Stemming from such constructivists approaches as Piaget’s and Vygotsky’s, inquiry learning requires students to take a more active and self-regulated approach to their learning experiences. It will also allow students to interact with each other and possibly the community, optimising their learning, understanding and eventual role within society. Learning the Humanities through an inquiry approach not only promotes deeper learning but it also promotes active involvement and development of critical and creative thinking (Reynolds, 2012). Critical and creative thinking skills are particularly important not only in learning Humanities but in their becoming of and contribution as an active and informed citizen. Encouraging students’ application of critical thinking will empower them to be more mindful and open to other peoples viewpoints and draw more informed conclusions and decisions when interpreting the world (Reynolds, 2012; Davison, 2013; Lecture 3).

Initially in inquiry learning, a teacher of Humanities should ensure a good relationship is built and maintained with students. This will result in a greater ability to facilitate the students learning by enabling a partnership of discovery and learning with students rather than the teacher merely instructing. It will also allow the teacher to gain a greater understanding of how the student constructs their information (Reynolds, 2012). More so establishing respectful, safe and stable relationships within the classroom, between peers, and the teacher and students will allow for an open environment where students will feel comfortable to contribute confidently hence resulting in deeper, more valuable discussions (Reynolds, 2012).

As in Vygotsky’s constructivist theory, an inquiry approach in Humanities employs a holistic approach to teaching content, emphasising the big ideas or themes (Reynolds, 2012; McInerney & McInerney, 2010). It is important in the inquiry approach however to ensure that questions are purposeful and stimulate deep learning and understanding, as well as that students are motivated (Reynolds, 2012). There are a number of factors which can have a positive or negative effect on a student’s motivation to learn. These include interest stimulated through relating to the students personal experience and today’s society, and the level of challenge presented to the child.

Throughout my experience of receiving primary and high school education I now notice there was a lack of emphasis on the importance of History, Geography and SOSE (now Humanities). Equally so there was a lack of exploration or identification of these subject’s relevance to the present and future, resigning them purpose-less and non-engaging to many students. This is only speculation of one person’s education, however Reitano and Bourke (2009) also acknowledge that History is often viewed as ‘boring’ and irrelevant, extending the need for these connections to the students’ world and
experiences to be made. In support of this Reynolds (2012) states a “History, Geography and SOSE curriculum should focus on important issues that are relevant and of value to the learners” (p.24). Not only in the Humanities should this occur, it is recognised in all areas of learning that there is a need to make learning relative and engaging (Walker & Bass, 2011). The teacher’s ability to do this in Humanities may also depend on their content knowledge of the area which is discussed later.

As well as content knowledge teachers should know their students’ current knowledge and use this to inform their teaching as many students are exposed to other experiences which they learn about history, geography, society and economics (Reitano, and Bourke, 2009). In coherence with Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development students optimum learning would occur through an appropriate level of scaffolding established from the teachers awareness of the students’ knowledge and current ability. Regarding the teaching of Humanities it would be good pedagogy to ensure students have a basis of knowledge yet are challenged to develop further through an inquiry approach. Combined with this it is imperative in all areas of the curriculum, not only the Humanities, that students are actively involved for learning to occur (McInerney & McInerney, 2010).

Halstead and Taylor (2000) explored different approaches in relation to values education particularly. It was found that many methods changed student ideas but not particularly how they acted or made decisions in society. Direct Instruction was one method identified as a form of explicitly teaching students on values however an inclusion of other strategies for the content to actually be effective was needed. Simply reinforcing verbally did not suffice and overall, as values education is inherently linked to the Humanities, it was found that it is best taught through inquiry (Halstead and Taylor, 2000). Additionally it was specified that “dilemma discussions were more effective than academic courses” (Halstead and Taylor, 2000, p.15).

Regardless of positive outcomes of values education, issues with educating about values do arise, resulting in a number of teachers actively avoiding it (Halstead & Taylor, 2000). Such issues may comprise of confronting issues, controversial issues and teachers simply not sufficiently knowledgeable of values education. This last point illustrates in itself the need for education of values to be established in primary school, for the exact reason for developing students’ awareness, understanding and self-confidence as future participants of society. More so, to avoid values education would be to render teaching humanities near pointless, as without values education links cannot be made between the past, present and future day, reasoning for societal decisions,
implications and the like. Both Reynolds (2012) and Reitano and Bourke (2009) accordingly state the need for teachers of Humanities to have strong content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge for effective learning.

A number of areas considering the Humanities have been discussed. It was found that values education and the humanities complement each other, and one cannot as effectively be taught without the other. Additionally each subject area requires an inquiry approach for sufficient learning and changes in student behaviour and attitudes in interacting with the world. A common implication with values education is the lack of knowledge on how to teach it as well as confrontational issues. These confrontational issues are more so a positive to the education of the students as they learn to appreciate others views in a safe, open forum (Reynolds, 2012).

Word count: 2194
References


