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Australianising social welfare education: The development of a major sequence 'Australian Cultural Studies' in a new B.Soc.Sci. (Community Service)

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Publication Details

Camilleri, P., Kennedy, R. & Oxenberry, R. (1989). Australianising social welfare education: The development of a major sequence 'Australian Cultural Studies' in a new B.Soc.Sci. (Community Service). *Welfare in Australia*, 6 (1), 9-11.

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Australianising social welfare education: The development of a major sequence 'Australian Cultural Studies' in a new B.Soc.Sci. (Community Service)

Abstract

Much of social welfare education in Australia is built upon the tried and tested knowledge bases developed within American and British approaches to social work and welfare provision. The experience of those two countries has dominated the theoretical frameworks for practice intervention and indeed, the analysis of social problems and societal responses to them. Australian experience has tended to play a supplementary role in that differences in context have altered or modified aspects of these overseas approaches, or some peculiar aspect of case experience has led to variations in response. The review and development of educational programs for social welfare work has raised questions about these traditional foundations. Australia, both in total and its regions, has unique characteristics in its history, geography, and political development and a clearer understanding of them appears to be emerging. The formulation and administration of welfare state provision now has a substantial history, as does the practice of various professional groups in aiming to assist people's capacities for social functioning and overcome social problems. This emergent culture of social provision is substantial and rich enough now to provide the grounding from which more specific theoretical propositions ought to be guiding social welfare practice. One of the impediments to this in the past has been the lack of a substantial body of literature and research in Australian practice. But this is changing, although, even the growth of Australian material still remains in danger of being swamped by the ever-increasing amount from overseas. Another impediment also has been the relatively small size of the social welfare and social work education sector. This too is changing and there are signs that the greater size of the sector could be mirrored by greater collaboration in future developments. One of the important components of social welfare education in Australia has been the two year courses leading to an Associate Diploma. In general, these developed around the early seventies in response to the need to qualify experienced welfare workers and provide a broader educational base than was catered for by in-service training. The circumstances of the eighties has seen considerable change in this area. Social welfare agencies now are not faced with dramatic growth or rapid expansion of activities. In general, no longer are they employing large numbers of unqualified people. At the same time, people have entered social welfare courses as a means of career change or for numbers of women, of a return to the work-force. Consequently, the nature of these courses has had to change to accommodate a different population. And a process of review and change has presented both the opportunity and the question about the fundamental character of an Australian social welfare course.

Keywords

studies, b, australian, australianising, soc, social, sci, community, welfare, service, cultural, sequence, major, development, education

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Camilleri, P., Kennedy, R. & Oxenberry, R. (1989). Australianising social welfare education: The development of a major sequence 'Australian Cultural Studies' in a new B.Soc.Sci. (Community Service). *Welfare in Australia*, 6 (1), 9-11.

AUSTRALIANISING SOCIAL WELFARE EDUCATION: The Development of a major sequence 'Australian Cultural Studies' in a new B.Soc.Sci. (Community Service)

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Introduction

Much of social welfare education in Australia is built upon the tried and tested knowledge bases developed within American and British approaches to social work and welfare provision. The experience of those two countries has dominated the theoretical frameworks for practice intervention and indeed, the analysis of social problems and societal responses to them. Australian experience has tended to play a supplementary role in that differences in context have altered or modified aspects of these overseas approaches, or some peculiar aspect of case experience has led to variations in response.

The review and development of educational programs for social welfare work has raised questions about these traditional foundations. Australia, both in total and its regions, has unique characteristics in its history, geography, and political development and a clearer understanding of them appears to be emerging. The formulation and administration of welfare state provision now has a substantial history, as does the practice of various professional groups in aiming to assist people's capacities for social functioning and overcome social problems. This emergent culture of social provision is substantial and rich enough now to provide the grounding from which more specific theoretical propositions ought to be guiding social welfare practice.

One of the impediments to this in the past has been the lack of a substantial body of literature and research in Australian practice. But this is changing, although, even the growth of Australian material still remains in danger of being swamped by the ever-increasing amount from overseas.

Another impediment also has been the relatively small size of the social welfare and social work education sector. This too is changing and there are signs that the greater size of the sector could be mirrored by greater collaboration in future developments.

One of the important components of social welfare education in Australia has been the two year courses leading to an Associate Diploma. In general, these developed around the early seventies in response to the need to qualify experienced welfare workers and provide a broader educational base than was catered for by in-service training. The circumstances of the eighties has seen considerable change in this area. Social welfare agencies now are not faced with dramatic growth or rapid expansion of activities. In general, no longer are they employing large numbers of unqualified people. At the same time, people have entered social welfare courses as a means of career change or for numbers of women, of a return to the work-force. Consequently, the nature of these courses has had to change to accommodate a different population. And a process of review and change

has presented both the opportunity and the question about the fundamental character of an Australian social welfare course.

Australian Studies

The Australianising of tertiary courses is a major educational and political issue. The publication and launch of the Report of the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education (C.R.A.S.T.E.) titled *Windows onto Worlds – Studying Australia at Tertiary Level* in 1987 strongly recommended the development of Australian Studies at all levels of tertiary education. This included science disciplines such as Mathematics, Chemistry, Physics, etc. The justification for such a radical approach is that tertiary studies must be developed in the context of Australia's experiences and needs. Australian studies further,

"should become an integral part of all studies in Australia. Australia should be placed at the centre of what is taught and learned in Australian education". Hon. Senator Susan Ryan (1987). (Former Minister for Education).

The growth and demand of Australian Studies at tertiary level has been a phenomenon of the late 1970s and 1980s. The expansion of material and resources for teaching has been spectacular. However, the model so far developed has been based on liberal arts programmes in which students choose electives drawn from academic disciplines of History, Music, Literature, Politics, Sociology, Geography, etc. An integrated Australian studies course has not been possible nor desirable in that context.

Vocational courses however need to choose how central Australian studies should be to their profession and what is relevant to teach. This is where the Committee to review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education (C.R.A.S.T.E.) has been productive in commissioning specific research projects. Some of the Reports such as Australian Studies in Teacher Education (Davis and Hammond 1986); Australian Studies and Legal Education (Widdup 1986); Australian Studies in Engineering Education (Darby and Middlebrook 1986); Australian Studies and Training for Community Services and Child Care (Caddick 1986); and Nurse Education and Australian Studies (Cottier 1986), have been very specific concerning vocational oriented tertiary education. However Social Work and Social Welfare have only recently began to deal with the issue of Australian Studies.

Australian Studies and Social Welfare

Some social welfare academics have begun to argue that Australian studies is urgently needed within social welfare courses. It is perhaps an imperative for the

development of new and innovative human services that these be grounded in Australian experience and needs. So many of our welfare programmes are directly imported from overseas particularly the U.S. and U.K., yet there is very little critical evaluation of their appropriateness for Australian conditions and problems.

Present courses in social work and social welfare are based upon American models of social welfare education. Australia's unique history, its social and economic development, and its political framework has largely been ignored. This cultural neglect, referred to by a number of writers (Healy, Rimmer and Ife 1986) has stunted the development of Australian models of social welfare practice (Ife 1986). A solution offered by some academics, has been the anchoring of social welfare courses in Australian *Cultural Studies*. Though such an educational experience it is believed that students will be "culturally literate" (McQueen 1986) Students

"will be better equipped to understand their clients' reality, better able to understand the major questions about the contradictions of the human condition, better able to understand the dominant values of various selections of Australian society, and hence will be better able to offer appropriate and realistic social work help. They will also be better able to adopt to new needs, new occupational positions, and new social trends". (IFE 1986 p.76).

Australian studies and social welfare are just becoming agenda items for welfare academics. As yet there is no model of what is appropriate to teach. The task has been to develop a model which would ground Australian social welfare in its historical, social, economic, political and cultural context. The final outcome of such a sequence of units would be the development of a *critically aware* social welfare practitioner. The model consequently had to attempt to ask and confront critical questions about Australia and hence ourselves, and to do so with intellectual rigour. And at the same time avoid too parochial an orientation.

A guideline for the development of the Model at the Institute of Technology was that it should deal with three interlocking issues over the three years of the course: gender, class, and, ethnicity and race were to be examined as they relate to specific substantive topic areas. Hence those issues are to be grounded in and explicated through the examination of Australia's historical, social, political, economic, and cultural development. The sequence "Australian Cultural Studies" raised many issues. The question of academic disciplines and their submergence in a framework of Australian studies; of what should be taught and how; and so on. None of these were satisfactorily resolved and perhaps nor could they be. The sequence is designed to raise as many issues and questions as it deals with. However it is a model which can be further refined, developed or through experience, radically revamped.

Structure of Australian Cultural Studies

a. *First Year:* The aims of the first year is to introduce students to the diversity of cultural perspectives and acquaint them with issues of the Individual in Australian Society. Substantive issues to be dealt with are centred around "Defining the Australian Context". In this the issues

of Aboriginal society and the effect of colonisation are to be examined. Australia's development as a penal colony, its economic and social development, and understanding of ourselves through Australia's cultural heritage. The structure of Australian Society is examined, through an analysis of stratification and social class. Australia as a multicultural society and the impact of migration on cultural identity and development is also considered.

b. *Second Year:* The aim of the second year is to extend the student's insight into contemporary themes and issues of Australian social life through examination of the major social institutions and their geographic context. The major social institutions selected are the family, education, work and health. For social welfare practitioners these are important areas for understanding the nature of social problems, their development and reproduction in Australian society. The geographical context of those social institutions are important in understanding Australia's attempts to deal with social problems.

c. *Third Year:* The aim of the third year is to enable the student to critically examine Australia's Political and Legal Order so as to become acquainted with issues of normative behaviour, deviancy and social control, and the human service organisations developed to deal with those. In the third year the issue's of deviancy and social control and how they relate to Australia's Political and Legal Order are of fundamental concern. Social welfare practitioners work in human service organisations which have been developed to deal with deviancy and promote social cohesion. This final year will provide students with the intellectual tools to be critical of such organisations and the practices that are developed from these.

Conclusion

Australian Cultural Studies for the education of social welfare practitioners is one of the most exciting and innovative development of the decade. The model we believe provides the beginnings of a healthy debate in social welfare education. We hope readers will comment on and perhaps argue with our model. But we do believe that this is a beginning of an important development for social welfare education.

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