A curriculum of questions for a schooling system prefaced on right answers

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This is a somewhat modified version of a short piece I wrote in 2003. It was hatched late one night in 2003 at Burwood, in conversation with Alan Reid who was, at the time, a DEST Fellow and working on the question of national curriculum. I should point out that the crazy ideas expressed below are not attributable to Alan. ☺

The current period in education is characterised by considerable interest in curriculum. In most states and overseas there appears to be an unease about the suitability of current curriculum for preparing the young for a world that is much changed from the period when most contemporary curricula were developed. New curriculum initiatives can be found in many states. Debates about these initiatives ask questions such as: what is worth knowing, what are ‘essential’ or ‘basic’ knowledges, and should there be more emphasis on process or content?

For education curriculum/policy makers, contemporary computer-based resources such as the Internet appear to place an emphasis on knowledge (as per the knowledge economy) which subsequently slides into debates about content, i.e. curriculum is about content, and, more often than not, its consumption. Significantly, the social character of knowledge is largely ignored.

The irony of schooling systems placing an emphasis on the consumption of various forms of knowledge at a time when the production and leveraging of knowledge and research skills are prized, appears lost in current debates.

My own view of curriculum is that it is the stories the elders of the tribe tell the young. I want to suggest that increasingly these stories, in this era, are less narratives and more questions, i.e. how should we live in the world? what does it mean to be an Australian? how do we relate to our geographical neighbours? how do we understand global phenomena such as finance, terrorism and entertainment?

As a way out of the problem of deciding in advance what is appropriate content to equip students to participate as active citizens I propose that we might think about curriculum in terms of questions. Importantly, this device might be used to engage the Australian community in contributing to the construction of a set of questions.

One way to operationalise this notion would be to poll a large subset of Australians to nominate, say 5 or 6 questions that they believe to be important to Australia now and in the future. A variety of events, protocols might be employed to arrive at a set of national questions, which would be the basis

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1 http://www.chrisbigum.com
2 See, for example Moore & Young (2001).
for curriculum across the country. The process might be repeated at regular intervals (3-5 years) to reconsider the question set.

How would the questions frame curriculum? Nationally they would constitute a statement of our priorities. Things that need to be investigated and thought about. A question, unlike a lot of content, can be contextualised at national, state and local levels. This then would be the curriculum. Engaging the young and their communities in a set of national questions, locally nuanced, that have arisen after a process of debate and contestation would require them to engage in knowledge production/leveraging and research. It would mark the country with a curriculum that looks forward in a more pragmatic and potentially effective manner compared with current content-focussed thinking.

References
Rowan, L., & Bigum, C. (2010). At the Hub of it All: Knowledge Producing Schools as Sites for Educational and Social Innovation. In D. Clandfield & G. Martell (Eds.), The School as Community Hub: Beyond Education's Iron Cage (pp. 185-203). Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

3 The knowledge producing schools agenda is one instance of this kind of thinking (Bigum, 2002, 2004; Graham, Lankshear, & Bigum, 2002; Rowan & Bigum, 2010)