



# 1

## Towards Some Definitions of Curriculum and Assessment

The first part of this chapter introduces the rationale for the narrative approach used in this book and examines some of the central elements that underpin curriculum and assessment. The main curriculum and assessment questions, and their relevant stories and storylines, are then introduced. Finally, an example of curriculum decision-making from a teacher's classroom experience illustrates how the complex integration of storylines is required in order to start to answer difficult curriculum questions.

## What is narrative?

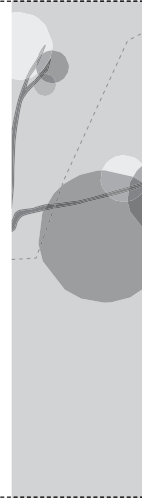
We may conceptualise a narrative work as any form of telling, where a telling involves a teller or narrator, an audience, and a subject. The subject concerns the arrangement of elements—actions, events, characters, experiences, and situations—into an unfolding temporal configuration that makes sense of or gives meaning to these elements (Rankin, 2002).

There are many different kinds of narrative: conventional stories with an orientation, complication and resolution, biographies, recounts, fairy tales, myths and fables to name a few. As the above definition highlights, narratives are usually located in time and space to convey a particular meaning.

Our constant use of *narratives* or *stories* is part of being human. There is no doubt that stories and *storylines* connect people and communities and that we use a range of stories—or the same story in a range of ways—in our daily lives to help us make sense of the world (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Hardy, 1975). Somewhere between the ages of two and three years of age a child will begin to share stories, both imaginary and those based in actual events. The renowned educationist **Jerome Bruner** (1986) claims that we have just two major ways of representing the world—a narrative mode and a logico-scientific mode. He suggests, however, that it is the narrative mode that is closest to our thought patterns and inner conversations. Perhaps this is why stories are such powerful ways of learning and understanding for many of us.

This book takes a narrative approach to the concepts of curriculum and assessment by examining themes and ideas that occupy the daily lives of many involved in the education profession. The next section provides a rationale for this rather unconventional approach to these subjects.

**Jerome Bruner** has had a very significant impact on educational psychology as well as education. He asserts that knowledge should not be regarded as absolute and that its acquisition should be motivated by the desire to understand the world and give it meaning. Bruner's work has been heavily influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist approach and he strongly emphasises the process of learning and the role of scaffolding in helping students learn. The teacher is seen as the facilitator of the learning experience with the students playing an active role in discovering ideas and principles for themselves where appropriate. Bruner believes that structure and sequence is important in organising ideas and that students revisit ideas through the spiralling of curriculum concepts. In his later writing he has highlighted the importance of narrative.



## Why a narrative approach?

This book uses stories and storylines to explore curriculum, assessment and a number of related questions, problems and issues faced by educators. **Bill Pinar** (2000, 1999, 1975), one of the most significant scholars in the development of curriculum theorising and thinking over the last thirty years, has promoted the importance of using such a narrative approach to curriculum through his use of stories to identify the important enduring themes in curriculum development. Indeed, along with **Michael Apple** (1990), Pinar has criticised curriculum scholars in the past for failing to acknowledge much of the historical construction of their field. The use of storylines in this book acknowledges, highlights and even celebrates the historical influences on how the concepts of curriculum and assessment and related practices are understood and valued today. It also allows us to investigate the recursive nature of curriculum and assessment plots and themes along with key characters and their dynamic,

intersecting and shifting roles. Many of these stories are currently receiving national and international attention. Some themes are commonly threaded throughout education systems in other countries; others are more particularly related to our Australian education context. Most of the examples used in this book are Australian, although where relevant they are linked with global storylines.



**Bill Pinar** envisaged curriculum as both a verb and a process. He sees curriculum as encompassing all the experiences that occur within the school or other learning context—what is intended and what actually becomes the reality. He believes that it is therefore extremely important to examine the perceptions of teachers and students participating in the educational activity rather than focus exclusively on teacher perspectives and purposes.



**Michael Apple** has been a curriculum activist at the University of Wisconsin in the United States for the last four decades. He has been particularly concerned with the growing conservatism in educational practice and provides critical analyses of the way curriculum policies and practices are always influenced by dominant ideologies and are therefore never neutral or innocent.

When we tell stories, we shape them according to the particular audience, our underlying values and the message we are trying to make—so they are never repeated in exactly the same way. They shift like the patterns of beads in a kaleidoscope when we turn the handle to change the perspective.

In developing the storylines approach for this book, I have been heavily influenced by the Indigenous concept of *Songlines* (*Yiri* in Walpiri). As I understand it as a non-Indigenous person, songlines are like tracks across the landscape. Indigenous Australians believe they were sung by their ancestors to pass on the stories of creation as they travelled

over the landscape moulding its physical features. Bruce Chatwin (1987, dust jacket) writes: 'I have a vision of the Songlines stretching across the continents and ages that wherever men have trodden they have left a trail of song.' We need to understand the curriculum and assessment 'trails', learn from them and envision new ones rather than continuing to repeat past patterns.

While a 'story' suggests a completeness or whole in itself, the concept of a songline seems to suggest a continuing, ever-changing movement. Adapting this idea to the concept of a 'storyline' signals an ambiguity or incompleteness in or around the actions and events, the development of the character(s), or the resolution of issues in the plot or themes. Wikipedia defines 'storylines' as 'narrative threads experienced by different but specific characters or sets of characters that together form a plot element or subplot'. Using this definition, stories and storylines have the capacity to interweave with each other, to disappear for some time and then re-emerge, perhaps in a different guise. The National Curriculum storyline in Australia is one example and can almost be seen as a 'grand' narrative. It has re-emerged in the last decade but this time it appears stronger and more focused than its first iteration in the early 1990s. Yet some of the issues are the same.

### Reflection 1.1: Your educational journey

Think about your own educational journey thus far. Are there particular ideas, themes or 'storylines' that emerge for you—recurring images or a pattern of similar events?

What do we understand by 'curriculum' and 'assessment'?

If stories and storylines are powerful ways to represent ideas, events, actions and dilemmas, it makes sense, then, to use them to develop an understanding of the complex concepts of curriculum and assessment.

These are central educational concepts and the terms are used frequently in policy and media. They are also crucial to the work of teachers and teacher educators at every level of education. How these concepts are interpreted affects daily decisions about teaching and learning practices and processes in diverse contexts all over the world. Yet our understandings about these concepts are constantly shifting. They vary according to the particular worldview that we hold. Raewyn Connell (1997, p. 1) describes the school curriculum as ‘the most difficult area of educational study—where the theory of knowledge meets the practice of classrooms in complex and turbulent ways.’

Developing an understanding of curriculum and assessment is further complicated because people use these terms to mean a range of different things. ‘Curriculum’, for example, is often and increasingly conflated with ‘syllabus’ or a set canon of academic subjects. At the same time the term properly used encompasses so much more. In Grumet’s (1981, p. 115) words, for example, ‘curriculum is the collective story we tell our children about our past, our present and our future’. These words still resonate despite the changes to our notions of childhood and the ‘collective story’ as well as how rapidly the present becomes the past. This book has been written with the conviction that the use of stories and storylines has the potential to help us understand ‘curriculum’ and ‘assessment’ and their associated practices in a more holistic way, and to follow their ideas, issues and themes as they weave through and connect with storylines from other fields of education and other educational concepts and practices.

In the past, curriculum ideas have often been represented in a linear, sequenced framework, which suggests a definitive beginning, an ordered unfolding of events and an ending. Assessment is too often only seen to be the endpoint of this framework. This implicitly presents a false authority about a particular construction—a certainty that belies the complex interactive and dynamic nature of curriculum and assessment. Stories and storylines allow for differences in personal and contextual perspectives to be celebrated. Take for example the constant struggles between politicians, bureaucrats, parents and teachers over issues of content to be included in a particular syllabus, or the way reading

should be taught, or how student achievements should be reported to parents or to the community more generally. Stories and storylines have the potential to capture and trace the key curriculum and assessment ideas, issues and themes across contexts and represent them from the perspectives of the different characters involved.

This book, then, examines how curriculum and assessment stories and storylines change in their emphasis and intensity depending on the beliefs, values, motivations and thus perceptions of the curriculum players (or characters) at a particular point in time. As in any narrative, the main elements include the time in which a story takes place, the setting, context or orientation; the characters (writers, practitioners, theorists, policy makers, academics, politicians, journalists, media personalities); the actions and events and how the complications or dilemmas are sometimes resolved or, often, managed. Themes associated with curriculum and assessment are woven and developed through plot.

The application of the elements of narrative are particularly relevant for curriculum study because, as Thomson (2002) suggests, curriculum can be seen as a series of different discourses that we interact with, bringing our own biographies and baggage, or virtual schoolbags. And in the words of Pinar and Reynolds (1992, pp. 1 and 7):

Curriculum ... as phenomenological text communicates a story in which quantitative social science is an evil character whose effort to quantify the immeasurable is unethical and epistemologically unsound ... Curriculum as deconstructed text acknowledges knowledge as pre-eminent historical ... not ideologically constructed ... rather as a series of narratives superimposed on each other, interlaced among each other, layers and stories merged and separated like colours in Jackson Pollock's painting.

Curriculum has always been central to the professional work of teachers. In the major part of the twentieth century, however, much curriculum theorising drew on its psychological, philosophical and sociological foundations. Many teachers saw it as largely academic, having nothing to do with practical classroom realities (Schwab, 1969). It is fair

to argue, however, that over the last thirty or forty years, curriculum and assessment storylines have become more closely linked to the work of teachers in schools and universities (Smith & Ewing, 2002). Teacher knowledge, thinking and decision-making are all integral to any account of curriculum practices. A study of the changing curriculum and assessment storylines is therefore imperative for every aspiring teacher and as part of any teacher education program.

### Central elements of curriculum

As mentioned earlier, the concept of curriculum is difficult to define easily, partly because it means different things to different people. Diverse understandings of curriculum are evident at various points in history, at different educational levels and in different contexts and systems. Bill Pinar, for example, once defined curriculum as consisting of everything that one generation would wish to pass on to the next!

#### Reflection 1.2: What to pass on?

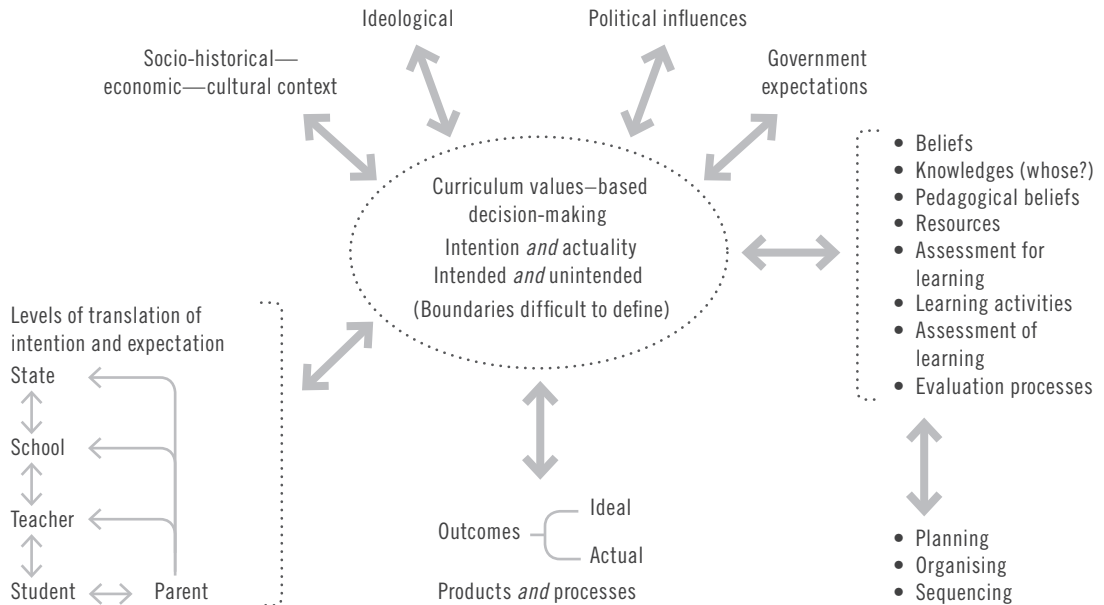
Take a moment to think about what you think **MUST** be passed onto the next generation. What things that were passed on to you would you leave out?

#### Intended curriculum

Is informed by one's *ideal curriculum* or underlying rationale or philosophy. These ideals or intentions are then specified in syllabus documents or guides and can be thought of as the *formal curriculum*.

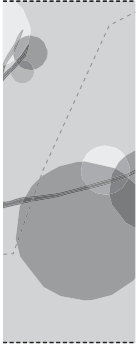
This book focuses on curriculum as it applies to those who are concerned with teaching and learning in a formal sense—in pre-schools and other early childhood contexts, schools, universities, technical colleges and other educational institutions. Some definitions of 'curriculum' are extremely limited and refer solely to subject matter that needs to be learned—what is **intended**—while others are very broad and encompass all the experiences a learner has while at a particular educational institution. Figure 1.1 presents my concept map depicting what comes to my mind when I try to define curriculum. You may wish to draw your own curriculum concept map.



**Figure 1.1** A concept map of curriculum

Source: Ewing (2010a, p. 9).

Despite the complexity of the concept map in Figure 1.1, the word ‘curriculum’ in everyday situations is, as suggested earlier, most often conflated with the word ‘syllabus’ or the content intended to be learnt by a student in a particular subject area. Discussions in Australia about the need for a national school curriculum are often in reality about the need for a national framework of mandatory subject content and associated learning outcomes. Given the different interactions between teachers and learners, the different beliefs and practices about how people learn and the huge differences in the contexts in which this learning happens, it is important to acknowledge that particular content can never be conveyed in exactly the same manner to different groups of children. Nor can any one lesson or unit of work ever be implemented in exactly the same way from one suburb to the next, let alone across the country. As **Lawrence Stenhouse** (1975) argued, there will always be a gap between the ideal and actuality, between what is expected and what is enacted.



**Lawrence Stenhouse** believed that ‘the central problem of curriculum study is the gap between our ideas and our aspirations and our attempts to institutionalise them’ (1977, p. 3). A believer in curriculum as process, he had a firm belief that teachers’ knowledge was important. He strongly advocated that teachers could and should research their own curriculum practices and therefore be change agents for their own curriculum reform through their professional learning. He has left a huge legacy in the curriculum field, particularly in the United Kingdom and Australia.

Others assert that the concept of curriculum can be traced back to early civilisations (e.g. Smith & Lovat, 2003; Schubert, 1986) because it is essentially concerned with community decision-making about what and whose knowledge is of most worth for whom and at what stage. Harold Benjamin’s (1939) parable about what constituted core knowledge for a stone-age tribe (e.g. should the new generation learn about catching fish with bare hands as a precursor to using an early fishing rod?) is very salient here. It is clear that curriculum is always a social construction and will therefore involve a compromise between what has been selected by one group of stakeholders in the interests of other stakeholders. In addition, as Clark, Milburn and Goodson (1989) emphasise, there will also be compromises between what has been thought most important or ‘core’ in the past and what new ideas and interests should now be understood.

The Latin origins of the word ‘curriculum’ are ‘curro’ (I run) or, as Pinar (1975) suggests, ‘currere’ (to be running). For the ancient Greeks, ‘curriculum’ meant a competitive running track. These usages suggest different perspectives: ‘curriculum’ emphasises the track on which the runner is running, while ‘currere’ and ‘curro’ focus on the individual’s running action or the existential experience of running in a particular race at a particular time in the runner’s own biography.

Pursuing the metaphor of a race, nonetheless, can be helpful in understanding the concept of curriculum and the experience of a particular curriculum by an individual learner. For example, what kind of race is the runner competing in—what kind of curriculum is the student experiencing? Perhaps a 100-metre sprint or a series of hurdles?

Perhaps a more extended cross-country or marathon race? Are the runners competing against themselves or is it about how well they do compared with the other competitors? Does it matter how long it takes to finish or is it a race against time? Is the racetrack flat or uphill? Do some of the competitors have handicaps or does everyone start the race together? Smith and Lovat (2003) provide a more detailed exploration of this analogy.



### Reflection 1.3: Your curriculum story

Using the metaphor of different kinds of races and racetracks, think about your own curriculum history. What kind of racetracks have you run on? What kind of curriculum races did you run/are you running at preschool/primary/secondary school/university? Tell your curriculum story.

A comprehensive understanding of the curriculum race is much more than the content and skills—it incorporates *how* the knowledge, skills and values are learned as well as what assessment strategies are implemented.

Deciding that the concept of curriculum defies an easy definition, the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) in 1992 developed a set of principles about curriculum work. More than two decades on with some slight revision they continue to be a helpful beginning for those engaged in curriculum work.

Curriculum work should:

- be informed by political, social, economic and historical analysis;
- involve explicit identification and evaluation of the values and beliefs on which it is based;
- involve critical reflection;
- acknowledge that individuals will experience the same learning activity in different ways;

- strive to expose and eliminate inequality experienced by individuals or groups;
- promote quality at the individual, school, community, system, national and global level; and
- be a collaborative experience, resourced to ensure active participation by teachers, other education professionals, students and parents.

([www.acsa.edu.au/pages/page493.asp](http://www.acsa.edu.au/pages/page493.asp), accessed 29 January 2013)

To apply principles such as these, curriculum development is therefore very much concerned with decision-making (Smith & Lovat, 2003). Subsequent chapters will explore the different kinds of decisions that need to be made in selecting, planning, implementing and evaluating curricula.

#### Reflection 1.4: From principles to action

How do you think some of the above principles can be actioned in schools and systems? By teachers? By parents? By students?

**Tests** Formal, systematic procedures used to gather information under uniform conditions. They do not have to involve just pencil and paper, but can be through a performance, a try-out for a team, a watercolour, and so on.

#### Central principles of authentic assessment

‘Assessment’ also means different things in different contexts. In essence it should be most concerned with making judgments about student learning at one point to make decisions about future plans for learning. It has been said, therefore, that assessment is integral or at the ‘heart of the curriculum process’. It is also often claimed that assessment regimes actually overly determine the intended curriculum. And too often the term ‘assessment’ is conflated with **testing** regimes. Student performance on particular assessment tasks is often used as an indicator of how well one country is doing educationally in comparison with others.

Once again, the ACSA’s (1996) assessment principles, workshopped by four South Australian educators, Phil Cormack, Bruce Johnson, Judy Peters and David Williams, provide a valuable starting point in examining assessment storylines.

Assessment should:

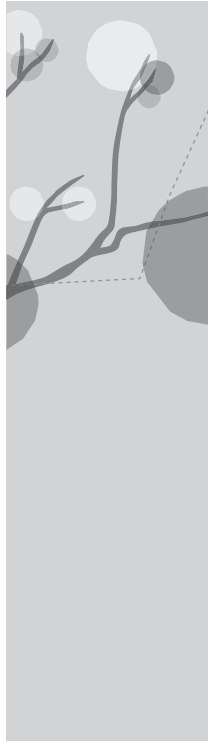
- connect to, broaden and problematise the curriculum;
- involve teacher, student and community judgment;
- connect to the world beyond school;
- involve complex thinking and problem solving;
- engage students in performing and reflecting;
- promote equity.

([www.acsa.edu.au/pages/page364.asp](http://www.acsa.edu.au/pages/page364.asp)), accessed 29 January 2013)

## CASE STUDY 1.1: APPLYING THEORY TO PRACTICE

Hani is both a primary teacher and the parent of two young children, one of whom has just started school. Early in her career, when still a pre-service teacher, she decided that in her classroom she would use a range of assessment strategies when making decisions about what children could and could not do. She wanted to make sure that she never judged a child's performance solely on one kind of task. She made this decision on the basis of her reading of relevant research and, while it was time consuming, especially at the beginning of each school year, it seemed to ensure that she planned effectively for her students as individuals. After her eldest daughter's first weeks at school Hani is disturbed to find her daughter's teacher has placed the daughter in the lowest ability group based on one analysis of her literacy skills and understandings. Hani understands that her daughter is shy and needs time to develop rapport with new people in her life but Hani knows her daughter is able to read quite well. Should she raise this with the teacher or forget about it?

Later chapters examine how these principles can translate to a range of assessment strategies and techniques. In addition the increasing emphasis on high stakes testing is discussed.



### Reflection 1.5: Applying assessment principles

Think about your latest assessment experience. Did it conform to the ACSA principles espoused on page 13? Which principles in your experience are most difficult to put into practice?

## Practical decisions: A teacher's dilemma

The final section of this chapter concludes with a simple example of a curriculum decision-making dilemma from a teacher's classroom experience. This example illustrates that in order to start to answer some of the difficult questions about curriculum, complex integration of the storylines that unfold in subsequent chapters is required. Developing an understanding of these storylines can also help teachers to make practical decisions about their curriculum and assessment practices.

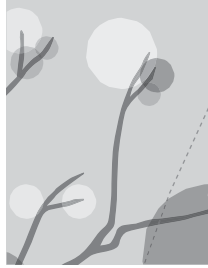
### CASE STUDY 1.2: CREATIVITY IN SECONDARY ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Rohan is a secondary English teacher in a comprehensive inner city school close to the heart of Newcastle in New South Wales. He has been teaching for six years now and continues to enjoy a passion for English. It was this passion that first drew him into the teaching profession after a brief career in public relations. He believes that the emphasis on literacy in a general sense has led to a devaluing of the subject English and particularly a trend away from creative writing.

He's also concerned that only a few of his senior students are choosing to study literature at an advanced level. He tries to make sure that his students apply the understandings about Shakespearian plays and sonnets to their own lives and think about how the themes in such texts relate to them.

He's worried about the increasing trend to assess students using multiple choice and short answer tests and the concern that other kinds of assessment are too costly. He feels strongly that deep understandings about literary texts cannot be measured in this way.

How can he talk with his students and their parents about his concerns?



## Summary

The curriculum and assessment storylines offered in this book provide a starting point for discussion, further exploration, even debate. There are no easy answers to some of the recurring curriculum and assessment questions and discussion will no doubt open up more questions and opportunities for **reflection**. These chapters are not intended to present final statements (or ultimate resolutions). In Mary Beattie's (1997, p. 9) words:

When curriculum is conceived as a story with a past, present and future which can be told from a number of perspectives, researchers and practitioners have the opportunity to deliberate on issues relating to authority, to who is the author of the story being told and whose stories are silenced, whose knowledge is of value, and to matters of power and control embedded in these issues ... When individuals share the stories of their own experiences they can both examine and interrogate the stories they tell in their practices, choose from among other available options, and imagine new possibilities.

It is my hope that such examination and sharing of stories will enable us as educators to work towards the imagining of new possibilities beyond recurring and out-dated storylines and themes. Only through such imagining will we be able to learn to live more creatively in our knowledge-building, post-industrial societies.

A number of key questions that are the basis for any curriculum and assessment work are beginning to emerge and will be important threads to think about in the unfolding storylines throughout the book.

### Reflection

Deliberate and focused attempts to make greater meaning and understanding of our experience.

## Discussion questions

- 1 Whose knowledge counts most? Whose doesn't? Why?
- 2 How can this knowledge be best organised, structured and sequenced for more effective learning to take place?
- 3 What resources and strategies are needed so this can happen?
- 4 How can we assess *for* learning as well as assess learning?
- 5 How do we know when learning has been effective?
- 6 Are there curriculum essentials that all students should be provided with?
- 7 Should we measure our learning outcomes against those in other cultures/countries?
- 8 How can learning be meaningfully reported to others?

## Further reading

Apple, M (1990). *Ideology and Curriculum*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

This book demonstrates how critical it is for teachers to unpack their 'saturated consciousness' (what they take for granted) about schooling, how children learn and what education is all about if they are to understand the social construction of curriculum and assessment. Only through this kind of reflection can educators start to unpack the stereotypes implicit in curriculum and assessment practices.

Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) <[www.acsa.edu.au](http://www.acsa.edu.au)>.

The ACSA was founded in 1983 to support meaningful, relevant and engaging curriculum work at all levels of education and across all sectors in Australia. It advocates for equity and social justice.

Bruner, J (1960). *The Process of Education*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Provides an insight into Bruner's early thinking about curriculum as process and the rationale behind his famous curriculum resource *Man: A Course of Study*.



Cohen, D (1992). *Liberating Curriculum from Sacred Cows*. Sydney: Australian Education Network.

David Cohen critiques ten 'sacred cows' about curriculum and assessment (e.g. curriculum is a document; curriculum is a rational process). He proposes some more liberating concepts about the nature of curriculum and assessment.

Connelly, M & Clandinin, J (1990). Stories of Experience and Narrative Enquiry. *Educational Researcher* 19(5) 2–14.

A frequently cited and very useful article about the power of narrative to document teacher professional journeys.

Luke, A, Woods, A & Weir, K (eds) (2013). *Curriculum, Syllabus Design and Equity. A Primer and Model*. New York: Routledge.

Focuses on what is defined as the 'technical' form of curriculum rather than its content. Each author stresses the need for principled syllabus design that values specific community context and the professionalism of teachers in the quest for equity in educational outcomes.

Smith, D & Lovat, T (2003). *Curriculum: Action on Reflection*. 4th edn. Melbourne: Thomson.

Documents the influence of the so-called foundation disciplines on our understanding of curriculum studies. The authors also demonstrate the importance of understanding both the intention and actuality of curriculum. This text defines curriculum as a socially constructed decision-making process.

