



# New Basics – Curriculum Organisers



## New Basics Project

N O V E M B E R 2 0 0 0



**Queensland**  
Government  
Education Queensland



This publication is the second in a series of documents to support trial schools participating in the New Basics Project.

This publication and other support material developed by the New Basics Branch is available for download from the New Basics website, <http://www.education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics>

For information regarding the New Basics Project please contact:

### **New Basics Branch**

Level 9 Education House, 30 Mary Street, Brisbane, Qld  
PO Box 33, Brisbane Albert Street, Qld 4002

E-mail: [newbasics@qed.qld.gov.au](mailto:newbasics@qed.qld.gov.au)

Web: <http://www.education.qld.gov.au/corporate/newbasics>

Fax: +61 7 3237 1956



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# New Basics

## Curriculum Organisers

### PREAMBLE

*New Basics – Curriculum Organisers* is the second booklet in a series written for teachers in the 38 schools throughout Queensland who began their four-year journey in the New Basics trial in 2000. The booklet's contents are derived from, and expand upon, the description of the New Basics categories presented in the parent document *New Basics Project Technical Paper*, released by Education Queensland at the beginning of 2000. This second booklet assumes knowledge of the contents of the first booklet, *New Basics: Theory into Practice*.

### WHAT ARE THE NEW BASICS?

The New Basics are futures-oriented categories for organising curriculum. Essentially, they are a way of managing the enormous increase in information that is now available as a result of globalisation and the rapid rate of change in the economic, social and cultural dimensions of our existence.

The New Basics are clusters of essential practices that students need if they are to flourish in 'new times'. Apart from globalisation, contributors to these new times include a shift towards local service-based economies, new and constantly changing technologies, complex transformations in cultural and social relationships, fluid demographics and a sense of uncertainty about the future. At the same time, and specifically related to the education field, are the increasingly complicated and complex demands on teaching and assessment that have accompanied the diversification of classrooms.

There are four New Basics categories and they have an explicit orientation towards researching, understanding and coming to grips with the newly emerging economic, cultural and social conditions. These four clusters of practice are deemed to be essential for the lifelong learning, social cohesion and economic wellbeing described in *Queensland State Education 2010* (QSE 2010), published by Education Queensland in 2000.

As curriculum organisers, the New Basics will help schools, teachers and curriculum planners move beyond a defence of *status quo* knowledges to a critical engagement with the ongoing change that characterises the new times. The New Basics presume the existence of mindful schools, where intellectual engagement and connectedness to the real world are persistent foci.

### Four clusters of essential practices

The four New Basics categories are:

#### 1. Life pathways and social futures

*Who am I and where am I going?*

- Living in and preparing for diverse family relationships
- Collaborating with peers and others
- Maintaining health and care of self
- Learning about and preparing for new worlds of work
- Developing initiative and enterprise

#### 2. Multiliteracies and communications media

*How do I make sense of and communicate with the world?*

- Blending traditional and new communications media
- Making creative judgments and engaging in performance
- Communicating using languages and intercultural understandings
- Mastering literacy and numeracy



### 3. Active citizenship

*What are my rights and responsibilities in communities, cultures and economies?*

- Interacting within local and global communities
- Operating within shifting cultural identities
- Understanding local and global economic forces
- Understanding the historical foundation of social movements and civic institutions

### 4. Environments and technologies

*How do I describe, analyse and shape the world around me?*

- Developing a scientific understanding of the world
- Working with design and engineering technologies
- Building and sustaining environments

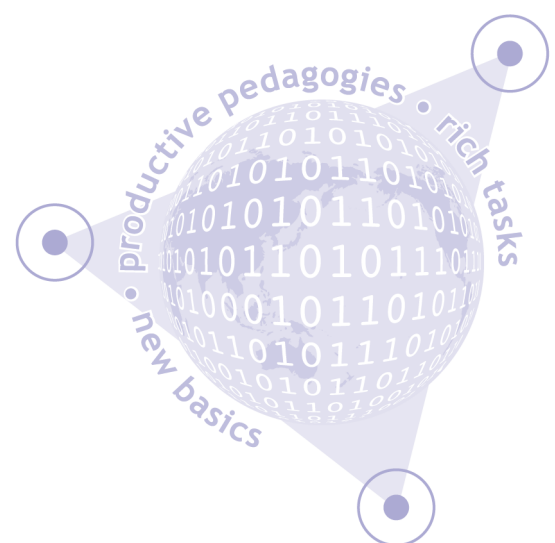
Thus the New Basics categories capture various aspects of the person in the world:

- the individual — physically and mentally, at work and at play and as a meaning-maker
- the communicator — active and passive, persuading and being persuaded, entertaining and being entertained, expressing ideas and emotions in words, numbers and pictures, creating and performing
- the group member — in the family, in social groups, in government-related groups and so on
- part of the physical world — of atoms and cells, electrons and chromosomes, animal, vegetable and mineral, observing, discovering, constructing and inventing.

### Transdisciplinary learning

The New Basics are 'transdisciplinary' — in other words, they draw upon practices and skills across disciplines. The transdisciplinary approach actively attempts to retain the integrity of each disciplinary methodology, epistemology and canon. It is, therefore, different from the traditional interdisciplinary approach that seeks links between disciplines — often via thematic learning with the possible consequence of diluted discipline-specific expertise. While operating in the New Basics Framework, teachers should perceive themselves as scholars and teachers in general education and specialists in at least one particular area.

A curriculum organised around the New Basics provides a mainstream core for all students, especially in languages and mathematics. It exposes all students to the visual and performing arts (even if expertise is not achieved) and treats performance (aesthetic and functional, public and civic) as central to demonstration.





## Intellectual activities

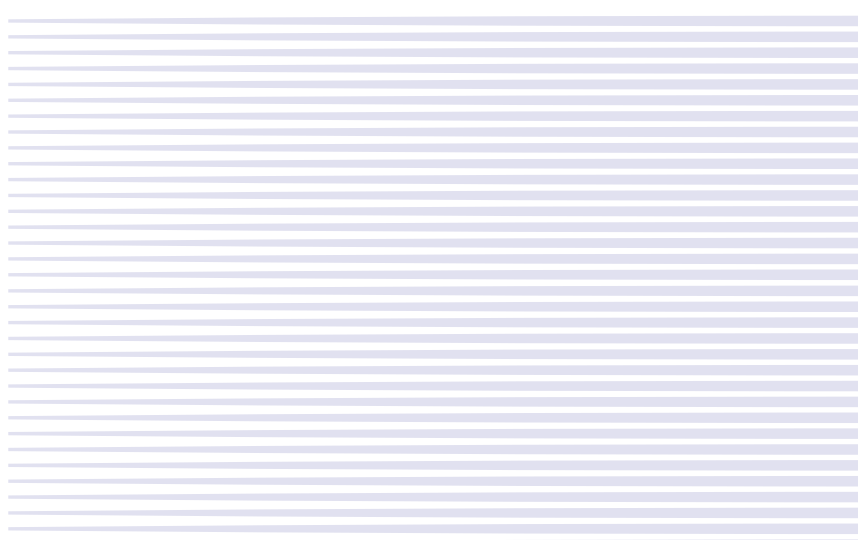
A curriculum framework built on the New Basics engages students in a wide range of intellectual activities, including:

- inquiry and expression
- reflection and thoughtfulness
- persistence
- organisation and time management
- reading efficiently and accurately
- using both written and spoken English clearly, economically and with grace
- understanding, appreciating and expressing ideas in other languages
- receiving nonverbal communication accurately and delivering it with sensitivity and colour
- organising, sifting through, arranging wisely and making sense of ideas and data
- using computers (including word processing), with an emphasis on the capabilities of the computer for communicating and expressing in multiple media
- studying and memorising
- civic behaviour
- applying knowledge well beyond the confines of the school
- figuring out how to think and act in unpredictable situations.

## The 'old basics'

When talking about the *new basics*, it is necessary to hold on to the notion of the 'old basics' — those essential areas of learning that underpin the way we engage with the world. But *what else* is basic for twenty-first century education, given that the future is likely to look radically different from the present? The major curriculum challenge is to ensure that schools keep up with the world as it changes and don't have to constantly play 'catch up'. In order to do this, schools and local communities will, in many instances, need to take the lead.

The old basics, including literacy and numeracy, remain at the heart of the New Basics; using new skills such as information technology effectively and functioning as an active citizen have been added to these old basics. A properly educated person, in the traditional sense of the term, is a person who understands the social contexts of history, culture, government, economics and so on; a person who has heard of Shakespeare and (Judith) Wright, Tennyson and (Banjo) Paterson, as well as Brad & Jen, Limp Bizkit, (Ian) Thorpe, (Cathy) Freeman and (Kevin) Walters. The so-called 'traditional' understandings are more of the old basics, and they are necessary but not sufficient as the substance of modern education.



## RATIONALE FOR THE NEW BASICS AS CURRICULUM ORGANISERS

### Three key questions

In a world dealing with information overload, rapidly changing local and global economies, communities that are uncertain about their futures, and new life pathways for students leaving school, the following questions need to be answered:

- *How do we most effectively organise learning activities in ways that do not clutter the curriculum?*
- *How do we provide space for deep intellectual engagement?*
- *How do we connect to the key issues affecting students' lives?*

### Crowded curriculum

One of the largest school reform studies in the USA, which involved the Coalition of Essential Schools, concluded that the more crowded a curriculum becomes, the shallower and more superficial the educational experience becomes, with particularly disastrous effects on the most at-risk learners. Students should study fewer things in greater depth in order to achieve greater levels of understanding and more appropriate learning outcomes.

### Blurring of boundaries

Another important issue is the blurring of boundaries around earlier curriculum categories. For example, there are strategies for literacy, numeracy, information technology, vocational education and science across the curriculum (the latter especially so around ethics). If so much is needed *across* the curriculum, how effective is the current curriculum organisation in meeting the demands of new skills and knowledges?

The aforementioned issues do not constitute an excuse for content allergy or a fully negotiated curriculum. Students are still required to demonstrate that they can acquire propositional knowledge. Although the aphorism 'less is more' should underpin the thinking that goes on in trial schools about the New Basics Framework, there is no sense of having students negotiate the curriculum. This is 'tough love'. There will be an assessment of student work against benchmarks expressed as desirable features.

### Connectedness

Teachers might struggle with the degree to which they can ensure that student learning is really connected to the world outside the classroom. They might also wonder how they can improve motivation and modify behaviour problems that sometimes arise because students cannot see the relevance of some classroom work.

This is not to say that the students' belief that the work is irrelevant is necessarily valid. Some students, unless they can immediately see the relevance of what they are doing, treat it with indifference or disdain and spurn it as unworthy of their attention. They seem to believe that relevance should be obvious and immediate, not realising that what seems earth-shatteringly important at 16 is, from the vantage of only a year, a minor matter that has obscured something of real importance.

Our challenge is not to gratify the immediate needs of the students, but to question the purpose of our curriculum choices. The key to this is visibility of purpose — ensuring discipline rigour *and* contexts for learning that are connected to the wide world.





## **Progressivism it is not**

Optimal learning and human development and growth occur when people are confronted with substantive, real problems to solve. The content and delivery of curriculum that is based on integrated, community-based tasks and activities will engage learners in forms of pragmatic social action that have real value in the world.

Although the possibilities for such tasks and activities can vary from the analysis of a community problem or issue to the construction of a facility, it is important that the New Basics Framework does not translate into a Progressivist educational agenda. In delivering a new set of basic educational outcomes for students, the school has to maintain a strong emphasis on rigour, accountability and teacher knowledge and expertise.

## **Valued performance**

The New Basics provide a cutting-edge and intellectually challenging framework that values high-quality performance in the following areas:

- researching and consulting
- analysing, synthesising, relating and selecting
- negotiating and personalising
- planning, designing and creating
- judging and deciding
- operating and making and acting
- evaluating and revising
- presenting, performing, explaining and communicating.

## **Implications for school organisation**

Two fundamental principles of the New Basics Framework will impact on school organisation in different ways in different schools. First, in schools using a New Basics curriculum framework, students can complete their work only by venturing into the world outside the school environment.

Second, teachers need to work collaboratively across disciplines in order to achieve the desired outcomes for students.

Many schools already encourage teachers to work in teams, while others have developed strong links with their communities through curriculum reform. The New Basics Branch will be available to support schools as they organise themselves to meet the needs of their local communities.

There are a number of organisational models that could be adopted:

- A secondary school might identify teams of five or six teachers to work together with a group of students over a two-year period, following initial planning with a sample of primary feeder schools. These teams would take responsibility for collaboratively organising the curriculum around the New Basics Framework so that it led the students to the Rich Tasks as culminating activities by the end of Year 9.
- A team of three teachers in Years 4, 5 and 6 could plan a three-year curriculum program around the New Basics while maintaining their traditional classroom organisation. In this instance, there would be continuity of learning over the three-year period with minimal disruption to the school organisation.
- A teacher could be appointed as a mentor for x groups of students (multi-aged) while expert teachers provide instruction in basic skills (spelling, graphing and so on) and act as reference points for specific knowledge and targeted repertoires of practice.
- Students could work in groups, contract for tasks, and identify resources required (including human resources). Teachers would have time to act as skill developers and expert resources.

Many other models are possible, some of which combine various elements of the four examples given above.





All of this having been said, it must be remembered that there are certain things that children and adolescents cannot access without the critical relationship between teacher and student.

These are the high-stakes discourses — those knowledges, fields and paradigms that have power and salience in researching, analysing, interpreting and influencing the world.

### Underpinnings

The New Basics agenda is underpinned by the notion that transdisciplinary teams of teachers working with students on tasks that are clearly connected to their life pathways will provide the space for students' deep intellectual engagement, as illustrated in Figure 1. (The tasks are the Rich Tasks, described in detail elsewhere.)

The model is not simply a call for integrated, holistic teaching. It is a call for a rigorous intellectual focus for student work that cuts through a crowded and potentially diffuse curriculum. All of the school's organisational capacity should be focused on intellectual engagement and relevant work, two characteristics that researchers have argued are necessary for improved outcomes. (This is not to suggest that schools will not do

the best by their students if they take on holistic approaches in a good sense as the New Basics categories will not work as well if they are treated individually.)

It cannot be overemphasised that the New Basics clusters reflect the core challenges that students face every day. These challenges are fundamentally about:

- self-understanding, identity, mental and physical health and planning life pathways
- mastering traditional and new communications media and their complex codes
- exercising their rights and responsibilities in relation to governments, communities and institutions
- acquiring a toolkit of scientific and technical concepts and skills so that they can understand and control their physical and social environments.

As a set, the New Basics clusters are not meant to be exhaustive, nor could they be. They embrace selections from an infinite set of possibilities. Teachers and schools will include other knowledges — local, classical, multicultural and alternative.

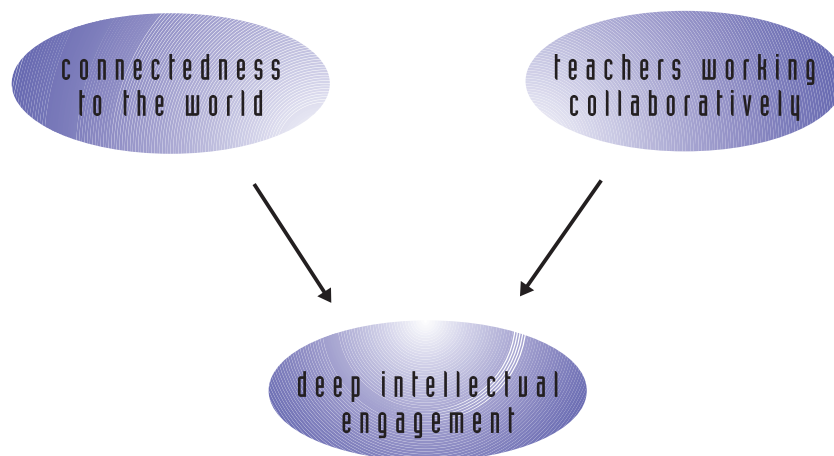


Figure 1: Relationship between students and teachers, students and tasks



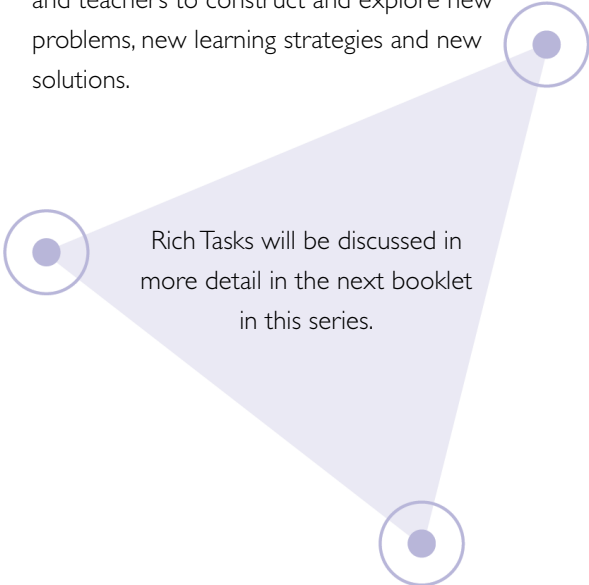
## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **What is the relationship between the New Basics and Rich Tasks?**

The New Basics necessitate rich and authentic assessment in the form of a set of Rich Tasks. Within the New Basics Framework, outcomes are defined as Rich Tasks, which are specific activities that students undertake that have real-world value and use. Through them, students will be able to display their understanding of important ideas and skills. Common statewide standards for assessment will be set, but the ways of expressing those standards can be varied to suit local circumstances.

Rich Tasks are designed and built from the New Basics categories, not from existing subjects or KLAs. By undertaking the Rich Tasks, students have the opportunity to master the New Basics to a level that will prepare them for participation in new economies, cultures and communities.

Each Rich Task is directly connected to the world of work, further study, civic affairs, family life, mass media and so on. Some of the practices are connected with traditional ways of doing things; others are responses to new times. Some of them require existing practices and skills; some the blending of old and new. Others require students and teachers to construct and explore new problems, new learning strategies and new solutions.



Rich Tasks will be discussed in more detail in the next booklet in this series.

### **Can you do Rich Tasks with the KLAs?**

While the Rich Tasks may be completed using the KLAs as organisers, this would do little to uncrowd the curriculum. Conversely, the Rich Tasks on their own would not do justice to the organising principles of the KLAs. As has been stated, the New Basics Framework and the KLA syllabuses are different pathways to meeting the legislative requirements of Queensland state schools.

The key point is that KLAs, New Basics and any other curriculum categories are arbitrary ways of dividing up the curriculum pie. Systems, schools, communities and education institutions make decisions about the outcomes they want for their students. It is up to teachers and curriculum planners to find the most efficacious way of organising learning to attain those outcomes. This might mean selecting from a range of fields of knowledge — such as the KLAs. Used efficiently, KLAs and New Basics can complement each other in focusing learning towards desired outcomes.

### **What will happen to transient students?**

Whatever the reason for students transferring from one school to another, it is essential that a record of prior attainments accompany them. In the present era of school-based management, school differentiation and local decision making, students moving into new communities will enter a Queensland state school that defines itself in terms of its local community as well as in terms of system, state, national and international expectations.

It is planned that students transferring out of a New Basics school at any time during their first nine years of schooling will be accompanied by the most elaborate portrait of achievement ever attempted in Australia. This portrait of achievement will prove useful even if the new school is not a New Basics school.



Students will face the problem of discontinuity only if their new school is either not using the complete New Basics Framework or not covering all of the expected outcomes from the KLA syllabuses. The New Basics are a comprehensive set of curriculum organisers that, when associated with Rich Tasks and Productive Pedagogies, focus students towards learning outcomes compatible with those of the KLA syllabuses.

Differences between schools are systemically encouraged through school differentiation programs. The aim of all schools in this climate is to ensure that transition between schools is as smooth as possible for the student. Digital portfolios will be designed for New Basics schools.

The New Basics Framework has the flexibility to allow students to work at different rates and at different performance levels. It can also be adapted to express a local flavour while, at the same time, focusing on transferable skills and knowledges for new times and an uncertain future.

### **What about movement into the senior school?**

One goal of QSE 2010 is to ensure that as many students as possible complete 12 years of schooling and that what is learnt in those 12 years clearly relates to the range of life pathways available to students entering the workforce, further education or training. The New Basics promote problem solving, critical and creative thinking and adaptable and flexible life pathways.

Education Queensland is committed to there being no disadvantage to students from New Basics schools in terms of their movement into senior school, specifically into subjects with Board of Senior Secondary School Studies syllabuses. To that end, there is work to be done on a notion of describing range and balance in terms of transportable higher-order skills. (It should also be remembered that the New Basics Framework does not encompass Year 10.)

The skills that are valued in the New Basics Framework are closely related to the common elements that have been identified as threading the senior curriculum.

As already mentioned, the New Basics Framework values performance in:

- researching and consulting
- analysing, synthesising, relating and selecting
- negotiating and personalising
- planning, designing and creating
- judging and deciding
- operating and making and acting
- evaluating and revising
- presenting, performing, explaining and communicating.

These are higher-order skills that can move students through varied and diverse pathways to powerful outcomes in the senior school and beyond.

