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THE ADVANCED SKILLS TEACHER
ISSN 1038-5940
Published Winter and Summer by Australian Education Network Inc.
PO Box 242, Springwood, NSW Australia 2777. Tel. (047) 54 3512 • Fax. (047) 54 3554. Subscription rate $20 per year, overseas $25.
surface mail $30 air mail.
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The Advanced Skills Teacher publishes articles of interest to experienced teachers. Views expressed do not necessarily agree with positions taken by Australian Education Network Inc.

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Education and teaching do not exist in 'splendid isolation', unaffected by the twist and pull of the historical, political, economic, cultural and social forces that otherwise shape human activity.

All education is social engineering. No matter the terms in which it is couched, education is about shaping people, and therefore by implication it is about shaping society in some way. It follows, overtly or otherwise, that education has an ideological dimension and function. Education and teaching are political in the classic sense of the word.

In the last fifteen years or so in America, Britain, New Zealand and Australia, 'economic rationalism', a powerful political/economic view of the world and life, has taken hold of education. In New South Wales it has been manifested in the Metherell-Scott vision of education foisted on the electorate by the crisis-prone Greiner government, while federally it has been a component of Commonwealth education policy, particularly under the stewardship of John Dawkins.

Educational rationalism

Economic rationalism in education is characterised by the idea that education is a business, not a subtly human/cultural process. Education institutions are regarded and administered as businesses, while those who work in them are 'human resources' to be exploited like any natural resource, the assumption also being made that more can be done with less; less funding, less staff. Attempts are made to align what is taught in schools and tertiary institutions with economic imperatives and the unseen but ubiquitous 'market forces'; the implication is that a robotic workforce, as opposed to a free thinking creative one, should be created and the ends to which we strive in education and life are materialist. For economic rationalists, human beings and education are simply management indices of utility to industrial society.

Rationalisation, a blanket term for retrenchment, redundancy and job abolition all disguised as 'efficiency', the forced amalgamation of tertiary institutions, funding cutbacks, school closures, privatisation, devaluation of the humanities, and increased testing, have also been part of the economic rationalist approach to education.

Reality turned upside down

Two recent books have helped my understanding of economic rationalism. A head on discussion of the phenomena via the methodologies of sociology and history is Michael Pusey's Economic rationalism in Canberra (Cambridge University Press, 1991). While the title sounds limiting, the book has attracted considerable international attention for it is a pioneering study of economic rationalism as cultural change, not only in Australia but globally.

Pusey is no friend of economic rationalism. Educated in England, France and Australia, and with a Harvard PhD, he is a sociologist by profession but reads more like a cultural historian and anthropologist.

To discuss economic rationalism at work in Australia, Pusey interviewed and studied 215 members of Canberra's Senior Executive Service, the elite 'brokers of interest' who help implement and articulate our national ideals and goals.

Analyzing this sample Pusey shows that these people, now in their forties, tend to be males from managerial and professional family backgrounds, hold conservative political attitudes, and in their twenties studied economics in a curriculum divorced from a liberal arts framework (unlike the economists of the post World War 2 period who learned their economics in a liberal arts context and therefore had 'a philosophically informed view of society and the human condition', a quality the new economists lack).

Pusey shows how the new economists have created cultural inversion since the 1970s. Put simply, reality has been turned upside down so that society is now the object of politics, not the subject; primacy has been given to the economy so that in the scheme of life people and human considerations rank a poor third behind the economy and politics, human society being contemptuously regarded as a 'sludge' that resists 'the economy'.

The arguments of Pusey are subtle, detailed, and closely argued. My thumbnail sketch does not do justice. Suffice to say it is an important book, and to me it says a number of things. Obviously with economic rationalism we are experiencing the legacy of academic specialisation, the divorce of economics, once a humanity, from its liberal arts context and its 'elevation' to a mathematical, statistical, computer modelling 'science'. To me Pusey's study is a timely warning against the current trend in education towards over-specialisation in the sciences, economics, business and management studies, devoid of any liberal arts input. One wonders what mutated world views await us in the future.

Pusey's study is also a powerful reminder that the idea of an economic system is an idea; it is not something we can see or touch; it is a symbolic and social construction. Hence it is not an immutable truth, but like all ideas vulnerable and subject to debate and challenge. I think we...
need to be reminded of this because economic rationalists would have us believe otherwise.

In education, where the trend is to emphasise economic imperatives and create narrow-visioned technocrats as opposed to thinking, questioning, socially responsive individuals who will strive to build a future with a human face, we who desire the latter can, and must, do battle.

How to wage a war of ideas
Which brings me to the second book, *Open letters*, by Václav Havel (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991). Playwright, author of many important essays on totalitarianism and dissent, Havel is a Czech intellectual, dissident and more recently his country’s president following the dismantling of communism. This volume is a collection of some of his writings from the period 1965-1990; it is an object lesson in how to wage a war of ideas.

Havel never opposed economic rationalism. But as his essays show, he was up against a society in which economic imperatives held strong rein, in which uniformity, discipline and conformity were stressed as opposed to diversity and individualism, in which bureaucratic structures, attitudes and practices ensured this was so, and language was manipulated by bureaucracy such that debate could not really take place, a process of ‘doublespeak’ and subversion of meaning, a society in which social critics did not really have to be physically punished because their concerns and activities automatically marginalised them, denying them social and career opportunities and relegating their criticisms to a peripheral world of apparent self indulgence.

Sound familiar? As I said, Havel never opposed economic rationalism. However he was up against the tools and processes employed by the economic rationalists. And reading his ‘Open letter’ to Dr Husak and the essay ‘The power of the powerless’, I recognised uncomfortable parallels between the Czechoslovakia of the recent past and attitudes, values and practices emerging in the Australia of today.

The optimistic thing about Hácel is that he refused to be marginalised, and *Open letters* is testament to his courage, persistence, and his desire to live in a society with a human face; in many ways Hável’s struggle in this book is ours too.

Don’t let them give people ideas
In this edited version of a speech to AEN’s April conference, publisher and critic Katharine Brisbane stresses the importance of the arts in children’s development.

I feel a bit of a fraud, because I am not a teacher, and yet I want to talk about what I believe to be the importance of the arts in education.

What I have to say may well seem to you naive, or ill-directed, or simply impossible to achieve under the present system. Nevertheless, all I can do is share with you what experience has taught me and hope that we might encourage each other.

Your invitation came as a result of a talk of mine which was published in the Sydney Morning Herald and recently broadcast on the ABC. It seems to have caused something of a stir among thinking people. The contents were relatively simple. In it I set out why I believed the humanities should be central to our lives; and how they could change our wicked ways. I would like to enlarge upon this by talking about the arts in education.

The arts are, in my view, quite simply the prime instrument of education because they require the employment of the whole personality, both reason and emotion, and because they are truth-tellers they make us face the large questions of moral and social order, they encourage observation, enlarge the imagination, and widen the debate by developing our capacity to see more than one side of a question; and their purpose is to seek the human, social and spiritual causes of the large and small events of human history and to illuminate them by re-enacting them in the imagination.

Not all our mentors, as you are only too aware, agree with this view.

You seem in danger of regarding literature as a drug addict regards his drug.

cries the Headmistress in Dorothy Hewett’s *The chapelp perilous* (p.6), ‘a perpetual stimulant to unreality ... I feel incapable of evaluating this ... I really cannot stand so much individuality.’

Recently in the news, evidence was offered that HSC students in mathematics were being marked higher than in English and students were being penalised. Maths is, pace the chaos theory, an exact science, English criticism an expression of opinion. Where bureaucracy reigns, there begins the dilemma.

Education is not training
In the last decade there have been huge administrative changes in our institutions by both State and Federal governments, from the amalgamation of universities and technical colleges to the restructuring of curricula at both primary and secondary level. Some of these changes are undoubtedly for the better; but in others a fundamental distinction has been breached between the notion and purpose of education, in the classical sense, and vocational training.

I had a good Presbyterian schooling which taught me no social skills but a respect for scholarship and the ability to recognise my own ignorance. And I suppose that is what I see as the purpose and meaning of an education: not to cram

Katharine Brisbane is a writer and critic on such topics as the arts and popular culture, and the publisher of Australia’s Currency Press.