

THE ADVANCED SKILLS TEACHER

ISSN
1038-5940

Winter 1992 • Number 1

2 Editor's page
Not just how but what and why

5 The good schools do
What makes a good school?

4 Flat earth department
*3 assessment myths
The streaming myth*

8 The big picture
*Rationalising the economic
metaphor*
by Rowan Cahill

9 FEATURE STORY
Don't let them give people ideas
by Katharine Brisbane

13 LEARNING & CURRICULUM

Getting it all together
by Graham Little

16 VALUES

View from the classroom
by Rowan Cahill

18 LANGUAGE

The changing face of literacy
by Brian Cambourne

22 ASSESSMENT & REPORTING

Cooperative assessment project
by Graham Little

24 TEACHING

*Teacher stress: all talk but little
action*
by Christine Dale

26 SCHOOLS & COMMUNITY

Skills, structure & stress
by Noel Wilson



28 Research update
Patterns of classroom talk
by Ken Watson

31 Have you read this?
• *Handbook of research of
teaching the English language*
• *Seven ways of knowing*
• *Parenting today*

32 What's trendy?
Grab whatever's moving
by Wayne Sawyer

THE ADVANCED SKILLS TEACHER
(ISSN 1038-5940) Published Winter and
Summer by Australian Education Network Inc.
PO Box 242, Springwood, NSW Australia
2076. Tel. (047) 54 3552 • Fax. (047) 54 3554.
Subscription rate \$20 per year, overseas \$A25
surface mail \$30 air mail.

Magazine © Copyright 1991 Australian Education
Network Inc. Copyright of individual articles rests
with the authors. Unless otherwise indicated,
material may be copied for educational purposes
provided it is acknowledged and a copy is forwarded
to the AEN office.

*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.*

EDITOR
MARK CAREY, Director, Australian Education
Network.

EDITORIAL CONSULTANTS
JULIA ATKIN, Educational Consultant, Harden,
NSW.

BRIAN CAMBOURNE, Director, Centre for
Literacy, University of Wollongong, NSW.
DAVID COHEN, Educational consultant and
publisher; Associate of David Syme Centre for
Enterprise Studies, Monash University, VIC.
ROWAN CAHILL, Teacher, Bowral High School.
TREVOR CAIRNEY, Associate Professor and
Dean, Faculty of Education, University of Western
Sydney, Nepean, NSW.
ANNIE DALEY, Australian Education Network;
Teacher and consultant.
BARRY DWYER, Regional Director, Catholic
Education Office, Sydney, NSW.
CHRISTINE DALE, Australian Education
Network; Teacher and consultant.
DAVID DUFTY, Author and consultant, formerly
Senior Lecturer Faculty of Education, University
of Sydney, NSW.
GARRY HOBAN, Lecturer in Science Education,
Charles Sturt University, Mitchell, NSW.
JANICE HALL, Lecturer in Education, Institute
of Early Childhood, Macquarie University, NSW.
PETER JONES, Publisher, St Clair Press; Teacher,
Trinity Grammar School NSW.
TONY KOOP, Lecturer in Education, Macquarie
University, Sydney.
GRAHAM LITTLE, Australian Education
Network, Educational Consultant; formerly

Principal Lecturer in Education, University of
Canberra ACT.
MARK McFADDEN, Lecturer in Education,
Charles Sturt University, Mitchell, NSW.
PAUL MARCH, Senior Lecturer, School of
Teacher Education, University of Technology,
Sydney, NSW.
SIMON MARGINSON, Senior Research Fellow,
University of Melbourne Centre for Study of Higher
Education, VIC.
GORDON SHRUBB, Head of English, Cranbrook
School, NSW.
WAYNE SAWYER, Head Teacher, English,
Blacktown Girls' High School; Lecturer in
Education, University of Western Sydney, Nepean,
NSW.
JACK THOMSON, Educational consultant;
formerly Lecturer in English in Education, Charles
Sturt University, Mitchell, NSW.
ERNIE TUCKER, Leading Teacher, Newtown
High School of the Performing Arts, NSW.
MANDY TUNICA, Educational consultant;
formerly Inspector of Schools, NSW.
KEN WATSON, Educational consultant and
publisher St Clair Press; formerly Senior Lecturer
in Education, University of Sydney, NSW.
R.D. WALSH, Writer, editor, environmentalist,
NSW.

View from the classroom

Rowan Cahill



I am pretty well fed up with politicians, some educationists, editorialists, P&Cs, cluster directors, bureaucrats, a literal torrent of people, harping on the need for education to meet the challenge of the 21st century.

Only the other night I sat through a 21st century oriented P&C meeting and heard how the new century will be a 'gee whiz' technologically spectacular century that most of us will be strangers in. It will be a new world, totally unlike the present. And the argument went that unless we prepared kids to meet this future, then we will betray them and sell them short.

When it came to preparing kids for this future, the wisdom of that P&C meeting, addressed and shaped as it was by members of the teaching profession intent on empire building and curriculum vitae enhancement, was to buy more computers for the school, look to the development of closer links with industry and business, and try to steer a significant proportion of the incoming Year 11 candidates into TAFE link courses where they would benefit by attaining business and clerical skills.

This is an edited version of a speech by Rowan Cahill to the Australian Education Network's 'Vision for the future' Conference, Sydney, October 18, 1991.

Now in some shape or form this seems to be the limit of futurist thinking in public education. Simply prepare kids for a gee whiz future. And all around Australia now, even as I speak, people are trying to guess the future and shape policies to meet those guesses.

False promises of the future

I was born in 1945. During the 1950s via the old *Pix*, *Post*, and *People* magazines, science fiction comics, movies, TV programs, politicians, encyclopedias, I was promised a gee whiz world. Now, aged 46, I should be enjoying the gee whiz comforts of commuter space travel; anti-gravitational transport; cars that no longer need wheels, rubber or petrol; a stainless steel antiseptic world of clean geometric glass cities where physical labour of all kinds has been replaced by robots – the sort of world Hanna and Barbera eventually enshrined in *The Jetsons* cartoons series, the sort of world Aldous Huxley had dealt with decades earlier in *Brave new world*.

Instead we've got a sick world, the pessimistic might even say dying, where the seas and skies are gradually being poisoned, where the forest lungs of the earth are being destroyed by acid rain, timber harvesting, and general clearance, where even locally people can blithely, apparently, accept that a large percentage of our city kids have lead in their bodies far in excess of acceptable international standards, where pollution levels have become part of the weather report, and when the pollution blows out to sea and

becomes part of the sea, people rejoice because it is no longer over Sydney. Poo on the beaches, poo in the sea, Botany Bay turning into a wasteland, a third runway for Sydney – and so it goes on.

Colleagues, the 21st century is not going to be a gee whiz century at all. Indeed that is all a con as far as I'm concerned. What the 21st century is shaping up to be in the present writ large; more pollution, more acid rain, more poisoned sea, more poisoned air, more lead in the kids, less trees, less open space, more violence.

Alienation in the 20th century

And it is ridiculous to talk about people being alienated in the 21st century unless we prepare then now in a gee whiz way. Ridiculous because people are alienated now.

As a country driver I have only to experience peak hour Sydney to see the metaphors of alienation – the cars that jostle for an extra inch of space ahead of a rival; drivers cocooned in their cells, intent on their music, air conditioning, and the next bit of vacant road space; the obvious stress, the drumming fingers; the racing at the signal lights, the defiance of sensible rules and regulations; the apparent emphasis on me to the exclusion of everyone else; driving as an ego trip.

Remember John Donne and his 'no man is an island' sermon? Well peak hour driving in Sydney is all about each man is an island. And that my friends is alienation. The *Mad Max* movies were not about a future wasteland. They were metaphors of our time.

The con of the gee whiz future

So far as I'm concerned, gee whiz futurist thinking is a con because while ever we keep our eyes on the 21st century, and keep imagining the future as some new country, or some new room, that we are all going to migrate to or enter, we successfully avoid having to confront the present.

Gee whiz futurist thinking envisages the 21st century as something not linked to the present. It seems to go hand in hand with thinking that argues that the knowledge we already have does not apply to the future, none of the past is applicable to the future, none of the skills of the present are applicable to the future.

As I see things, the future is related to

the present, and as I've said, the future will be the present writ large. I believe that if we want to avoid this present writ large (that is, the future), if we are to help create a future in which we will not be aliens, then we need to deal with things in the here and now.

And this has more to do with dealing with human values, human relationships, ethics, the ability to think, to question, to find out, than it has to do with bunging more computer hardware into the schools, or designing futuristic gee whizz technological courses.

To those who argue that the problems of the present, as I describe, require new technologies, and that somehow we should be preparing kids so they will in later life develop these technologies, let it be understood that we already have all we need to protect the world's topsoil, restore forests, halt the spread of deserts, supply clean water, raise energy efficiency, develop renewable energy, slow population growth, and retire developing world debt. It would cost all up an estimated \$170 billion a year, which by the way amounts to about eight weeks of world military spending in the 1980s.

The same old needs and failings

What is lacking is the will, or ability, or desire, to get together and solve the problems that confront us. The question surely is why is this will, this ability to get together, missing? Which brings us to matters of economics, nationalist and religious rivalries, inequalities of all kinds, human ignorance ... nothing gee whizz about it at all, simply good old human emotions and needs and failings, things that philosophers, theologians and teachers have been variously grappling with for thousands of years.

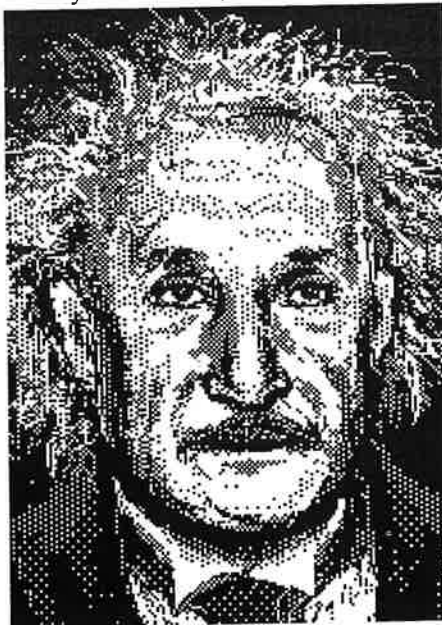
This is where the con comes in. Because in the long run it is financially cheaper and less controversial, and more neat and comfortable, to focus on the future than it is to bankroll an education system that works towards creating thinking, questioning, resourceful human beings who are going to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. Cheaper because this latter type of education system can only exist in concert with teachers who are highly trained, sensitive, alert, adventurous, the best we can get, and therefore highly paid. And these teachers

would have to be adequately provided with resources, while the type of teaching they would have to do could not really take place in horrendously concocted composite classes or with class sizes that would not have been strange thirty years ago.

Experts in splendid isolation

The problems facing humanity today are complex; the problems of the future will be even more so. The solutions to humanity's problems require expert and specialist attention. But looking back on how the problems we face developed, it is apparent they were largely caused by specialists and experts who worked in splendid isolation with a tendency to disregard what was beyond the tunnel vision of their expertise. Recall my image of the peak hour driver; the same metaphor of alienation applies to the way experts and specialists have been trained and set loose upon the planet.

When experts came along who decided to poach in other fields of expertise, and distinguished themselves in the process, the label renaissance person, or eccentric, or genius, was set upon them, a sort of mark of Cain to set them apart as brilliant people, yet lepers all the same; not something you'd really want to emulate even if you could. And I think here of people like Albert Einstein who came via his science to ponder metaphysics and morality; Manning Clark who came via history to ponder metaphysics, politics, religion, and wrote short stories; Aldous Huxley the novelist, who wrote history,



poetry, biography, plays, and added to our political, moral, medical and psychological understandings; Charles Birch, the Australian biologist who has since the 1960s achieved international acclaim as an ecologist and theologian. The list can go on and on.

My point is that such people are not strange, extraordinary, nor in a sense unique. What is different about them in comparison with ordinary run of the mill experts is that they adopted an intellectual model that was not based on the model we tend to favour in our education systems today. For them the whole of human knowledge was a playground, a field of excitement and accessibility; disciplines existed in the sense that one fired their enthusiasms beyond others, but they realised at all of the so called disciplines can join together, that there are connections between the different fields of human enquiry, and that if we are to make sense of life, of our world, we need interdisciplinary approaches and understandings. The world, life, is too complex not to.

And that, I think, is one of the urgent tasks and challenges of the immediate future; to reject increasing pressures to create narrow specialists, whether in the tertiary, secondary, or I fear, the primary spheres; to tear down the old model of the narrow specialist, just as our brothers and sisters elsewhere have torn down the Berlin Wall and the statues of Eastern Europe.

Having done so, let us then legitimise the exploration of the world and education and human understanding in an interconnected way, acknowledging the interdependence of all disciplines. In the process we just might succeed in creating a school system that provides young people with a sense of purpose, and a sense of meaning, surely the most important contribution schools can make.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Pam Cahill for our discussions prior to preparing this speech.
2. On the costs involved in globally reversing environmental damage see Norman Myers, (1991). *The Gaia atlas of future worlds*, Penguin Books, p.162.
3. For an interesting discussion on the theme of education creating purpose and meaning see Neil Postman, Engaging students in the great conversation, *Phi Delta Kappan*, January 1983, pp.310-316.

