

EXPERIENTIAL TEACHING AND LEARNING :
WHAT PRIORITY?

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Introduction

As the nature and extent of the current cultural revolution in Australia become more and more visible, so the resolve to develop appropriate forms of teaching and learning will strengthen. Profound changes in society - and especially in employment - operate to challenge the old nexus between schooling and career. Hence conventional forms of sorting and ranking - so far a major function of the schools - will mean less and less to many teachers, students and parents. A continuing decline in career opportunities for record numbers of graduates and school leavers during the next decade must expose basic faults in the delivery system. But the threat of social and political upheaval will produce a climate favourable to structural reform. As a result, schooling as we know it seems unlikely to survive the eighties.

Schooling and Education

Let us distinguish here between the concepts of schooling and education and define schooling as a formal process of intervention in people's lives. Because of its arbitrary and intrusive nature, schooling can convey penalties as well as gains. Thus schools may operate in ways not conducive to education if defined as a positive response to structured experience. Education by developing personal resources enables people to exercise greater control over their lives. Within this perspective schooling ought to serve as a vehicle to enrich the human spirit.

Only ignorance of the diverse outcomes of schooling helps to sustain the traditional tendency to define education in terms of academic success. Such a belief - as recent research undertaken by the Poverty Commission has shown¹ is not shared by many young people who consider that their school experience has not met their basic needs. These - which they in common identify - include the ability to understand self and society and to secure a good job.² Instead, many teenagers leave school ill-equipped to cope with the complex and conflicting demands being made of them by a turbulent society. The frequent failure of schooling to educate is reflected in the high rates of drug addiction, marital breakdown and road carnage.

Threats to Schooling

Despite the huge economic and social costs of personal defeat, major shifts in the labour market seem more likely to expose educational myths associated with schooling. Post-war growth - both demographic as well as economic - have largely influenced the size and shape of the delivery system. Secondary schooling, especially, rode during the sixties the expansionary wave. The huge influx of migrants permitted the workforce to expand while large numbers of teenagers remained longer at school. Credentials gained there as well as at higher levels could produce tangible benefits through improved career prospects.

The sudden reversal in economic fortunes has served to reveal the shallow bases for current school policies. Despite changes in outward appearance and teaching styles, the essential characteristics of schooling remain largely unaltered. Despite much evidence to stress the importance of good teacher-parent relationships, liaison between school and home typically receives scant notice. Equally the diverse cultural backgrounds of students are seldom given serious attention - particularly in the planning of curricula.⁵ These serious faults reflect the still relatively crude levels of technology by which schools operate.

It is salutary to discover that the educational value of schooling gets low marks from members of the academic elites. As the Sydney 12 to 20 study revealed, the prospects of gaining high status and income essentially motivates teenagers to persevere at school.⁴ Usually their parents share the same expectations for material success rather than personal fulfilment.⁵ Even more disquieting is the finding from the poverty research and more recent investigation for the Williams Committee that many parents and teenagers perceive teachers in general as non-caring persons.⁶ Bitter feelings expressed by both recent and previous school leavers spring from an alleged failure by teachers to treat students with respect.⁷ Such negative attitudes towards the 'profession' hold obvious implications - politically and financially - for the schools during a period of structural change.

Significant shifts in formal relationships have already occurred in the world of work. The extensive use of automated processes has now seriously

altered the labour market. In areas such as retailing and factory maintenance there is a rapid trend towards a casual workforce determined by computers and performed by contract. In noting this trend Professor G W Ford points to the rising proportions of shift and part-time workers in the labour force. In such situations young people find fewer and fewer openings to careers. Some perfunctory jobs - like those on check-out counters - often rely on a constant turn-over of juveniles who are replaced once they turn eighteen. But other jobs using sophisticated plant often demand a fairly stable workforce. Hence employers prefer to take on adult and experienced applicants - especially those with known financial commitments such as paying off a home. For these and other reasons teenagers are seldom seen on an assembly line.⁸ In one instance factory hands reported not having seen a young person on the job during a period of seventeen years.⁹ Yet we still hear teachers affirming a major resolve to avoid turning out school leavers as 'factory fodder'.

In white-collar occupations also demographic as well as economic factors threaten to bring about intense competition for available positions. Estimates are that about 250,000 school leavers will each year until the late eighties hit the labour market.¹⁰ In addition the universities and colleges will annually turn out 50,000 or more graduates and diplomates.¹¹ But due to the marked decline after 1971 in the birthrate and other adverse phenomena, the school systems and government departments - until recently ready employers of young people - are recruiting fewer graduates. Almost all of the professions face problems of oversupply and resulting unemployment - even for members of academic elites.¹² The promise of gaining tangible benefits from continued schooling has faded.

Mass unemployment among young people has produced diverse reactions. A familiar stance is to blame the victims for lack of effort or ability or both. Employers are given to complain about irresponsible school leavers who are deficient in basic skills. Teachers are given to maintain that schooling should do more than prepare children for work. Government leaders may express concern at the problem and hope that the economy will soon turn the corner. But few members of the main power groups seem prepared to construct ways of dealing with the causes and not just the symptoms of growing disorder.

Roles for Schools

Schools by themselves cannot create new jobs or remove social injustice. Teachers as a group are not well-placed to deal with difficulties resulting from marital breakdown, poverty, isolation or ill-health. Subject to many constraints, schooling typically does not lend itself to major initiatives on behalf of young people at risk.

Nevertheless, schools remain the sole significant source of education for many children - particularly those living in depressed and remote districts. Teachers' salaries often constitute by far the largest input of public funds for local communities. Moreover, given the fragmentation of family life and decline of other institutions such as the church, teachers bear a greater responsibility to help young people to meet the growing demands of society.

It is therefore sad to find school staffs who have decided to opt out of both traditional and new responsibilities. In some disadvantaged areas we find situations in which desperate teachers follow a policy of co-

existence with students. As a result any perceived sources of likely tension and conflict are avoided. Thus the work of both teachers and students lacks any sense of purpose or fulfilment. Isolated from local society these schools remain locked into a meaningless set of motions.¹³

By contrast, other schools seek to identify and meet the educational needs of their communities. In remote places some principals and their staffs have set out to help improve the general quality of social life. In depressed suburbs some schools have given first priority to the education of parents. Teachers encourage parents to participate in school affairs and consult with them about curricula and methods. Students may also have a voice - both formally and informally - in the making of policy. Through constant feedback staff members can be sensitive to cultural and other factors which affect relations between home and school.¹⁴

These more open approaches tend to be more visible in primary schools than at the secondary level. These particular barriers to communication arise from separate disciplines and often an artificial consensus among staff members about basic aim and purpose.¹⁵ Hence any initiatives taken by secondary schools tend to be mere extensions of academic curricula. Recent moves to introduce or extend programs of work experience generally reflect the additive approach.

Nor surprisingly the purpose of work experience may appear ambiguous to employers and personnel managers. Some see it as being unduly expensive and potentially disruptive. Other managers perceive a lack of scope for useful activities by students - especially if work experience is meant to be a likely prelude to finding a job. Even managers who are favourably

disposed towards the programs criticize their lack of clear rationale and definite purpose. A general failure of schools to feed back information to firms about the value of specific activities is a particular source of grievance.¹⁶ Also in schools where work experience is largely limited to less successful students, the programs may serve to facilitate the traditional process of sorting and ranking young people for prized careers.

Superficial and cynical approaches from various quarters to the issue of employment underline the need for full-scale reviews of the changing nexus between school and work. Representatives of schools, industries and local communities should come together to help design and construct suitable programs of teaching and learning related to the workplace and other settings. As a result the different actors - teachers, students and others - will have a better opportunity to link bookish learning with first-hand experience with the aim of developing a useful repertoire of personal and marketable skills. In these ways school can play a constructive role in an area of vital concern to young people and their parents.

Experimental Ventures

In order to create new frameworks for thought and action, two pilot schemes are being planned in Melbourne to facilitate successful transition from school to work. As basic premises the project recognizes the right of every school leaver to enjoy ready access to career. By 'career' we mean paid employment which offers fulfilling work and opportunities to advance through further education and training. So long as access to career is limited to one-quarter of the workforce, serious constraints on the schools will continue to operate.¹⁷

Planning for the project also recognizes that transition from school to conventional forms of employment will be for many young people at best a prolonged one. A main objective is therefore to provide continued education and formal training associated with community service projects so that teenagers will be better placed to assume more skilled and responsible roles in society as well as the workplace. 251

The working party for the project is representative of various interest groups. These include the state department of education, the new planning and examining authority known as the Victorian Institute of Secondary Education, local government, TAFE colleges, high schools and employers as well as Australian Frontier and Burwood State College. Pilot schemes are to commence in 1979 in two high schools - one in a working class suburb to the west of Melbourne, the other in a middle class suburb to the east of the city.

The pilot schemes are to involve students at the Grade Twelve or HSC level. This stage has been chosen because of its strategic importance in the reward system and because of the greater maturity of the students. Aged sixteen years and older, these young people may be able to secure some form of income support. To this end approaches to government departments are being made.

Besides geography, differences between the two schools are marked. To persevere until final year holds doubtful value for students in the west. Many leave before the examination and those who succeed often secure at best a clerical job locally. Few gain entry to prized careers in fields such as law and dentistry. School leavers in general face the prospect of being unemployed for long periods. Sensitive to these problems, the principal and staff seek more effective ways to operate. They have in common shown positive interest in the project and favour an immediate start.

By comparison the reaction by teachers in the eastern school has been cautious. The principal, though keen to be involved, believes that the program should take a year to plan and produce. Largely wedded to conventional structures, the staff as a group perceive little need for alternative approaches. Unlike their counterparts in the west, teachers have yet to

develop an explicit rationale for their work or establish a systematic way of following up school leavers. In these respects the situation in the east seems familiar. Unless the principal can stimulate a reflective process towards priorities and practices among her colleagues, the project will hardly proceed beyond the planning stage.

The success of the project will depend on the readiness of teachers to admit other actors - including employers and students - into the planning and developing process. If the range of structured experience is to be significantly extended for young people, those persons who are directly involved in worthwhile fields of conventional and community work must be continually consulted. It also follows that programs seeking to encourage a sense of commitment and responsibility to specific enterprises among students should also involve them from start to finish in the business of making decisions which affect their life chances and well-being.

Under the general title of *Structured Entry to Career*, the two pilot schemes have the following aims :

1. To develop an equivalent to the Higher School Certificate.
2. To offer to grade twelve students an alternative mode of teaching and learning which integrates theory with practice.
3. To recognize the expressed wish of many teenagers for courses which help them to enter careers and cope with social demands.
4. To enable emerging young adults to assume more responsible roles in the community.
5. To monitor and evaluate the value of structured work experience as an integral part of an educational programme which sets out to develop a repertoire of specific skills.
6. To increase the students' knowledge and experience of work and community organisations and understanding of how they function.

Above all it is recognized that young people want to find paid and fulfilling jobs. A major task for the project steering committees and the school working parties to facilitate a successful transition from school to work. The three groups while operating at different levels have to undertake - in collaboration with others - a constructive and creative role.

Some characteristics of the proposed programs include:

1. Duration - 2 years: half-time study and half-time work experience - with possibility of financial support.
2. A rigorous and demanding course - carefully supervised and monitored.
3. Core studies (communication skills, social understanding, self-awareness, research planning and evaluation techniques) and electives.
4. Participant observation and involvement in conventional work places - as a field for training and education.
5. Participant observation and involvement in community development projects as a field for training and education.

It is important to note that the programs will not amount to diluted versions of academic courses but rather will constitute distinctive and demanding studies. Skills in action research as well as communication and human relations are intended to be important outcomes of the programs.

A constant monitoring of the pilot schemes is also planned. The various actors will have an opportunity to identify specific criteria for evaluation and to affect the ways in which feedback is facilitated and judgements are made.

Recent research suggests that a potentially large number of people from various quarters want to contribute something useful to the area of transition from school to work. Some managers and teachers have already demonstrated a willingness to explore the educational potential of the workplace.

Given suitable leadership and support, many other people will welcome the opportunity to link bookish learning to first-hand experience.

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POLICY-MAKING AND POLICY PROCESSES IN EDUCATION:

SOME CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

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Note: This paper draws substantially from a paper entitled
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