

FROM THE HEAD MASTER



HEAD MASTER'S ADDRESS TO THE TEACHERS' GUILD OF NSW ANNUAL DINNER AND PRESENTATION OF AWARDS

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“TEACHING IN AUSTRALIA – AN OCCUPATION TRYING TO BECOME A PROFESSION?”

In November 2006 I had the opportunity of attending the 25th Anniversary Institute Programme conducted by the Principals' Centre at the Harvard School of Education. Arguably the most interesting and challenging presentation we had in the programme was from Professor Richard Elmore who provoked the gathering of educators with the following propositions, viz;

- That education is a quasi profession – at best, a profession without a practice or an occupation trying to become a profession
 - > Teachers don't control the profession as practitioners in Medicine and Law do.
 - > In education, it is politics that defines failing schools and then blames teachers – and, where schools succeed, politicians take the credit.
 - > Importantly, he made the point that amateurs are people to whom things are done, whereas professionals do things for the profession.
- Commenting on what he saw as the pathologies of existing Institutional educational structures he observed that:
 - > They operated in a normative environment that viewed all matters of practice as matters of idiosyncratic taste and preference, rather than subject to serious debate, discourse or inquiry.
 - > They exhibited a structure of work in which isolation is the norm and collective work is the exception.
 - > That the managerial philosophy of the job of the administration was to protect or buffer the teachers from the consequences of their instructional decisions and from any serious discussion of practice.

Although his remarks were primarily generated by his observations of the educational scene in the United States and even allowing for a degree of exaggeration on his part, I am not sure that they do not ring true to a degree for the Australian context of education as a whole, as well.

For example, perhaps one could argue today, that in most schools, the former prevailing teacher sentiment that saw the teacher's classroom as a personal fiefdom, where he or she ruled and no other practitioner including the Head of Department dared to enter is over. However, on the other hand, one would find it hard to sustain the proposition that teachers rather than politicians, are indeed in charge of education in Australia today.

What of recent developments? Well, we could say that the formation of the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) with its aim to provide national leadership for the Commonwealth, state and territory governments in promoting excellence in the profession of teaching and school leadership and the subsequent endorsement by the Education Ministers of the Australian Teacher Performance and Development Framework could be viewed as helping to address some of Elmore's aforementioned weaknesses of seeing teaching as a quasi profession.

Similarly, within our own state, “Great Teaching, Inspired Learning – A Blueprint For Action”, published by NSW Government in March this year, covering the four key areas of initial teacher education, entry into the profession, developing and maintaining professional practice and recognising and sharing outstanding practice could also be cited in support of teaching's professional status.

On the other hand, there appear to be still some challenges yet to overcome.

Recently, Dr Lawrence Ingvarson (ACER) aptly questions whether AITSL has the capacity to ensure that Australia gains the respected profession-wide certification system that is needed. He points to AITSL's lack of independence and authority, especially in a context where support for the National Partnership Agreements between the Federal and state governments is waning or weak.

He goes on to say that,

“For a third time, Australia has tried to establish a national professional body, but it is not third time lucky. The currently fragmenting National partnership is not a context conducive to steadily building a professionally and publicly credible system for recognising and rewarding accomplished teachers.”

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Whilst we as teachers can postulate and debate with politicians, sociologists, economists, journalists and bureaucrats as to the causal reasons we cannot but acknowledge that Elmore's dictum, namely, that amateurs are people to whom things are done – professionals do things for the profession – could still apply to the Australian teaching environment.

Unfortunately, the volatile, highly charged political, economic and social forces that daily contest the right to have their say in evaluating and determining Australia's educational future seem to have the sway – and not only on talk-back radio.

It is they, the real amateurs, who occupy centre stage while we as teachers often play the minor roles, being brought into dialogue at strategic moments in an attempt to add some credibility in support of the latest panacea to Australia's educational ills.

I believe this situation is further exacerbated when we then attempt to implement solutions through a centralised bureaucratic process that appears to lack sufficient understanding of the contextual nature of the teaching profession or the schools in which we serve our children. The changing relative importance between Federal and State jurisdictions, roles and responsibilities, legal and otherwise, further complicates the bureaucratic morass that entangles attempts at educational reform in Australia.

From a grass roots perspective, practically speaking, the amount of time and volume of evidence that needs to be gathered for the progressive development of portfolios for accreditation to the higher bands of Highly Proficient and Lead Teacher by the National Standards seems to bear little reality to the ever-increasing time pressures that our senior teachers and administrators already face in their day-to-day duties.

Further, assumptions that school administration can automatically cope with the associated economic costs of time release for staff, provision of professional counselling by senior experienced staff and opportunities for staff observations are simplistic and unrealistic to say the least. These costs are not insignificant: for example I am aware that some independent schools have budgeted more than half a million dollars on an annual basis to help implement the new national standards Band system. These costs also in no way cover the anticipated salary increases that schools will need to fund when staff progress to higher bands.

Likewise, the focus on quantitative data rather than qualitative data, reflects a methodology more applicable to that of a trade environment rather than to a professional context.

The "dissection of the teaching – learning process" approach, as a guide to improving teacher effectiveness, while helpful, especially when as we now have more evidenced based research to hand, such as the work of John Hattie (*Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. New York: Routledge) to guide us, must still be carefully managed and not overplayed.

Teaching is both an Art and a Science and if we examine the teaching-learning process solely via a scientific, segmented approach, (which I would contest is more applicable to viewing teaching as a "learned trade" rather than a profession) we risk depreciating the fact that our profession is also, in part, a creative art form of human expression.

Here, I am reminded of my former headmaster's wise words when responding to questions that sought to place some defining limit to human qualities of virtue, Mr Hogg would say, "*the more we define, the more we confine.*"

While it is true that education exists to serve the needs of the community in a general sense and therefore there needs to be a productive positive dialogue between the community and schools, much evidence suggests that the voice or opinions of the teaching profession is often being marginalised in such discussions.

The inappropriate focus of attention and use of 'league tables', in whatever shape or form they come, whether that be relating to Naplan Scores or international comparison through PISA results is a case in point. Professor Alan Reid's comments on the limitations of the PISA tests raising serious questions about their efficacy are most instructive here when he comments that:

"The use of PISA to assess quality and as benchmark for our national educational aspirations is fraught with danger. If I am right, then basing educational policy on lifting PISA results may be educationally counterproductive and damaging."

(Source: Professional Educator August 2013 Vol.12, Issue 4, p.14.)

Historically, there have been many attempts to reform Australian education and enhance the professional status of teaching. Unfortunately, the success rate in such endeavours is in keeping with the current challenges facing Australian Cricket and Rugby – namely, much is being promised but little of substance has been delivered.

Clearly the transitioning of the status of our profession in the minds of the general public at least, from that of a trade or quasi profession to true professional status akin to the status of teachers in some European countries like Finland for example, has still some way to go.

However, I don't believe this should discourage us, as undoubtedly progress is being made, albeit more slowly and hesitatingly than we would perhaps like. In the interim, I believe we should be redoubling our efforts to communicate a more balanced approach to matters educational.

There is an increasing predisposition on the part of present policy-makers and public to compare the results of systems and jurisdictions. There is also a revulsion among teachers themselves about the oversimplification that those scores represent, how they distort what the school is endeavouring to do, and how they scream against the measures which orient the school's learning programs towards personal formation and individualisation. (ACEL Monograph Series Vol 46 p.17)

As educators, we need to remind society that education is much more than test results and league tables. As Miss Elisabeth Knox, former Headmistress of PLC and President of The Guild, reminded members of the Guild at the time of her retirement in 1968, it deals with such matters as "the inculcation of moral and ethical standards of courtesy and manners and of human relationships."

Education is fundamentally a relational experience. The extensive work of Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley, principal researchers and authors of the International Boys' Schools Coalition Conferences Research Study, published as "For Whom The Boy Toils: The Primacy of Relationships in Boys' Learning" (2013) which involved some 35 schools in the United Kingdom, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, tellingly underlines that

Successful teaching and learning do not occur in a mechanistic transmission of instruction and content from teacher to student, but rather in a feeling-charged relational medium created by teachers' directive presents, resulting in a climate in which students' engagement, effort, exertion and ultimate mastery are mutually embraced arms. Relationship is not only conducive to those aims but necessarily precedes them: boys (and I daresay girls) learn from a teacher whom they hold in particular regard (page 195)

When I reported back to the Trinity staff regarding these findings I was tempted to comment that it was somewhat gratifying to have been involved in education for long enough to see that one's prejudices have finally been confirmed by research!

This human dimension, this fundamental relational experience in the teaching/learning process, is at the heart of our profession. It is also at the one time the most demanding and the most rewarding component of our profession.

When people say that education is about knowledge, its acquisition, organisation and application, we need to remember that knowledge, per se, does not reside in a book, be it hard cover, soft cover or e-book form. Nor does knowledge reside in a databank, league table, pie chart or histogram.

"Knowledge is always embodied in a person and taught and learned by a person, used or misused by a person"
Peter Drucker, *Post-Capital Society*, p.191.

Hence, knowledge is about morality, character and judgement.

That is why, when we seek to educate the students in our care by nurturing and challenging them in a secure and disciplined environment through a relational dimension, we see the teacher teach not primarily the subject, but the pupil through the subject.

This means that every subject and every School activity is to a greater or lesser degree, influential in forming the character development and spiritual awareness of our students. True education is involved in the transmission of ideas and values and it evokes a sense of purpose – what to do with our lives.

Education which fails to clarify central convictions is merely training, reflective of an occupation rather than a vocational calling to a profession.

The profession of teaching, in its vocational sense, involves wholehearted commitment and involvement on the part of every faculty member. That is why I believe sport and co-curricular experiences have an important place in forming the culture within our Schools, for they provide us with a unique opportunity for staff and students to share a common out-of-the-classroom experience that engages them, relationally, through the *hidden curriculum of life* that occurs in our Schools.

This so-called "hidden curriculum" deals with the important lessons of life: the triumphs, tribulations, trepidations, and the tragedies of human existence; the lessons that help form character and contribute to positive School spirit and tone. Here in the midst of our communal, relational experiences, involving students, their parents and our staff as their coaches/mentors, we practice the art, craft and science of teaching.

In the classroom, on the sports field, in the gymnasium, on stage, in the orchestra pit, at Cadet camp, on the Duke of Edinburgh expedition, at lunchtime Bible study, at House meetings, at assembly, during Service Week – every engagement, every opportunity, right up to the end of that final Speech Night – in short, the entire panoply of School life, in and out of the classroom, calls for such engagement between our students and staff if we are to best meet the needs of our pupils, their endeavours to reach their God-given potential, purpose and passion in life.

In summary, though teaching in Australia does not as yet exhibit all the traditional characteristics of a profession – where teachers and schools commit to engaging wholeheartedly with those entrusted to their care in a meaningful, relational sense that engages with both the "art" as well as the "science" of the practice of teaching – we have a situation where teaching is no longer regarded as merely an occupation or, in the minds of some, as a tiresome trade. Rather, it becomes the most noble of professions – a calling worthy of our best endeavours, reflective of mankind's highest ideals. This is what I believe the Teachers' Guild of NSW stands for and this is what we celebrate tonight in acknowledging such professional commitment on the part of those who are about to receive their awards.

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