

Case Study 2001

A “FRANK” REFLECTION

Preface

I recall the first day of my M.Teach degree studies whilst walking to University and regaining a part of my consciousness which had been forced to lie dormant for the past three years or so, since I last attended a University. A part of myself, which has had little place in many of the work places I have worked during my fifteen year quest in searching for a sense of self purpose within the hallowed corporate sector.

At the age of sixteen I recall that my life [*along with my first true love*] was so clearly and well defined. In fact, my thoughts at such a young and impressionable age were some of the most focussed I ever recall having, which included plans concerning myself [*and my first and only love – so I thought at the time*] attending teachers college and gaining qualifications to teach, with the goal of teaching in both overseas and Australian areas less privileged than the main stream.

I had a passion, both personal and professional – *well as professional as a senior high school student could be* – but I had hopes and dreams of the mutual benefits I could bring to those whom I came in contact through teaching.

I was to be the first in my family to graduate from a university. I was going to help others through my abilities to communicate and be accepted by others as someone who could listen and give advise when asked, which generally made sense. I don't think I ever thought about being a teacher, or to teach as much as I thought that “*I was going to help*”.

Now at thirty-three years of age, I feel I have traversed some sort of intellectual and spiritual maize, which keeps me finding my way to some form of further education, or self help as the case may be, depending on your point of view.

My passion has always been there, but for one reason or another, we tend to pursue careers and lifestyles which at times quash our passions, as has been my case to date – but no longer do I seek the so called status of corporate life and all the material trappings of the “upwardly mobile junior executive”.

NO, I say to my peers, for I have now the courage to pursue that which I knew to be my chosen profession, MY PASSION. For I will teach, and I will help, both myself and my students.

“The ability to learn from our experiences is all the education we need”

To date, I would have to say that my perceptions and attitudes regarding the education system as a whole has changed to the point of adding fuel to the fire which has rekindled my passion. I can almost feel my cape unfolding in the winds of change, as I transform into yet another caped crusader of the “Super Teach” genre.

My mission simply to break down those teacher student barriers through truth, justice and the M.Teach way. To build a solid foundation for which my students will create a new empire of understanding and social consciousness, as we look to our future through the children of the world.

But reality kicks in rather quickly as we begin to research the fundamentals of education, in so far as attempting to answer questions concerning the meaning and purpose of education and curriculum. Not to mention determining our own role as teachers and the role our students will play.

Fundamental in developing a degree of understanding of the role that each of these factors play in the education process, is coming to terms with the concept of communication. For me, this is the essential area which holds the key to my own personal development as a teacher in training, at this point in time.

The outcome of the communication process is the way we give meaning to our experiences, as it is fundamental in both the construction and reproduction of our education and learning. A classic example of the way in which communication (in this instance written) moulds the social acceptance and perception of gender through the classroom, by way of the literature used.¹ Communication within the education system not only introduces students to the concepts of social understanding, it creates and reinforces social behaviours and perceptions.² Similarly, Woolfolk highlights, through a number of research studies, that... throughout the entirety of the education system, the curriculum can be seen to be communicating gender bias in favour of men.³

It is not my intent through this personal reflection to address the issue of gender bias in education, suffice to suggest that in trying to develop an understanding of education, and my future role as a teacher, I need to make myself aware of a variety of issues which have an affect on not only what I do, but the affects it can have on my students.

For me this brings me back to communication in its many forms including oral, visual, physical, audio and text. They all play an integral part of the education process and creates, what is commonly referred to as, the curriculum.

What is most interesting to me is that even after numerous school visits, discussions with teachers, and doing a hell of a lot of reading. I still do not know how to concisely define curriculum.

Why is that, I ask?

May be because everyone seems to have a different opinion on what curriculum means for them, what it means for the school, and what it is supposed to do for our students. There are a number of definitions floating around including...

¹ Gilbert, P. (1992). "The story so far: Gender, Literacy and Social Regulation" *Gender and Education*, Vol. 4, No. 3.

² Ibid, pp. 32-43, also refer to Britton, J. N. (1970). "*Language and Learning*", Penguin Publications.

³ Woolfolk, A. (1993). "*Educational Psychology*", Allen & Bacon: Sydney, pp. 170-3.

“Curriculum as a design process made up of a selection of cultural knowledge determined suitable and practical to teach”⁴

and...

“Curriculum, in its fullest sense, encompasses all of a students experiences over all aspects of school life”⁵

From discussion with some teachers during our school visits, it meant the following...

“curriculum was what the board of studies tells the principle what we are supposed to teach in the classroom”⁶

to

“curriculum is what I decide to teach in the classroom”⁷

I get the feeling that the term “curriculum” should have a section all its own within the dictionary, as it is used colloquially and sparingly as any word I know. However, like my fellow M.Teach colleagues, I have a fair idea of what the general term for curriculum is, and what its purpose is within education. But it will not preclude me from exploring its use and meaning throughout my travels. I hope to discuss this further in class.

Communication for me underlies all the key factors highlighted to date, as well as enabling an understanding of the role communication has in the wider community through the variety of media outlets, which more often than not, portrays a poor image of the education system which simply reinforces the existing negative social perceptions of education.⁸

With all the reforms that occur within the education system with the intent of creating greater opportunities for students, and for teachers. As well as schools themselves embarking on projects which challenge orthodox education methods, and achieving some very encouraging results.⁹ The media, for all its worth, rarely highlight such achievements.

The media has however, had an absolute field day with the happenings of one teacher, having a well known history and reputation of sexual relationship with students.

⁴ Derived from lecture materials presented March 24, 1998 by Cusworth, R. and Smith, D.

⁵ Metherell, T. (MP). A white paper on curriculum reform in NSW Schools 1989 “Excellence and Equity”, Sydney: Allen Printers, p. 8.

⁶ Teacher of years 5 & 6 North Sydney Dem.

⁷ Head teacher of Science, Newtown, HSPA.

⁸ “Social Expectations of Education”, p. 133 in Derry, S. and Murphy, D. (1986). “Designing Systems that Train Learning Ability: From Theory to Practice”. *Review of Educational Research*, Vol. 56, pp. 1-139.

⁹ Some of the programmes being run at Cremorne public and Newtown HSPA, both formal and informal, seem to be producing very promising results: Viewing the students journals is evidence that the different approaches are producing high quality work, above the standard “curriculum” and parent expectations... and that’s got to be good.

In an interview aired on the channel nine "A Current Affairs" program with a former principal of the teacher in questions, stated that whilst he knew of such relationships, he did not see it his position to interfere, *as the two were consenting "adults", and his teaching was not being affected*".¹⁰

I guess you can have a sexual relationship with a senior high student, whilst being married and in full knowledge of your principal or head teacher, and as long as you don't let your teaching of other students suffer... IT'S O.K.

Call me naïve, but I was under the impression that there existed some sort of tacit understanding and belief that sexual relations with your students was out of the question. A sort of unwritten oath, that upholds the trust and faith the community places in our hands... their children.

Q. What sort of message does such a relationship communicate to, not only the students, but the community as a whole?

A. Not a very good one I am sure!

There have been a number of discussions held about this and related topics, both formally and informally within our seminar group, and one thing you can be sure of, is that a high degree of concern exists within the majority of our group.

We have discussed NEVER being alone with a student, especially one of the opposite sex. NEVER EVER being in a classroom or staff room alone with a student, especially during a lunch break or before/after school. NEVER EVER EVER find yourself alone with a student outside the school. All of this seems to be due to a lack of trust on both sides of the fence (ie both parents and teachers) and the understanding that teenage hormones (and imaginations) may in fact have a metaphysical affect on the adolescent memory and recall.¹¹ Don't get me wrong, I do not for one minute believe that the students imagination and or hormones are to blame for such situations. What I personally believe is that as adults, and as teachers we need to display to our students, our peers and the community that we are above all else, PROFESSORIALS.

Professionals who *do not* see the classroom or play ground as a platform for pursuing personal pleasures. Professionals with the sole purpose of *educating students* in the best possible manner, in order to *better prepare students* for a not so easy adult life after school.

I think that my perception of professionalism in teaching has been best personified through two teachers I have observed, one at Newtown HSPA, and the other at North Sydney Dem. Both had similar ideals, and whilst their execution of them varied, the methodology and outcomes were remarkably similar of which I have summarised some of the key issues for my own reference as follows...

¹⁰ A more disturbing case has also been the focus of world attention regarding the imprisonment of a teacher in the United States who continued to have a sexual relationship with a thirteen year old boy...

Bring the Class up to your expectations, not the other way around!

Teacher location in the classroom communicates a lot to the kids. Get in amongst it and relate to the students, whilst using your desk as a point for notices and instruction.

THINK ON THE SAME LEVEL AS THE STUDENTS – talk to them and ask them questions. When the students were asked what makes a good teacher, the recurring response was “- *a teacher that listens to students ideas*”.

Gain control and respect of students, without gaining absolute control, and there should be no need to SHOUT. Once you have gained control and “*cultured*” the students, you basically have them – and they will do more on their own, than any curriculum would dictate!

Brainstorming session with students prior to starting new subject matter will give you a better idea of students prior knowledge and perceptions and possible misconception.¹²

The METHODOLOGY of non prescriptive teaching:

Introduce the topic

Search for common interest within the group

Prompt for further discussion and insight

Brainstorm

GO WITH IT

Students have sense of ownership

refer Constructivism, Metacognition.¹³

In my opinion this is what education is about, giving the student a say in what happens in the classroom, and how they go about it. Whether it be through collaboration, simulation or teacher guided individual work, it all adds up to an education.¹⁴ Providing opportunities to develop personally within a system which can tend itself to individual obscurity for both students and teachers. The curriculum is many things, *not just what is prescribed by the department*, for the way in which teachers decide to communicate these subject areas and the way in which resources are utilised are just as critical in that they become the hidden curriculum. The sometimes

¹¹ Baddeley, A. Revised Ed. (1997). “Human Memory: Theory and Practice” Psychology Press.

¹² References include Chase, W.G. and Simon, H.A. (1973). “Perceptions in Class” *Cognitive Psychology*, Vol. 4, pp. 55-81. Anderson, C. W. and Smith, E. L., “Teaching Science” in Koehler, V.R. (Ed.) (1987). “*Educators Handbook: A Research Perspective*” Longman, N.Y., pp. 84-111, Yates, G. and Chandler, M. (1991). “The Cognitive Psychology of Knowledge: Basic Research Findings and Educational Implications” *Australian Journal of Education*, Vol. 35, No. 2, pp. 131-153.

¹³ Walker, R. A. (1992). “Metacognition: Thinking About Thinking and Learning How to Learn”, *Forum of Education*, Vol. 48, pp. 119-140. Wertsch, J.V. “Adult – Child Interaction as a Sense of Self Regulation in Children” in Yussein, S.R. (Ed.) (1985). “*The Growth of Reflection in Children’s*” Academic Press, London.

¹⁴ A similar theme has been expressed in the writings of Barnes, D., Britton, J. and Rosen, H. (1971). “*Language, the Learner and the School*” Penguin Books, Revised Ed.

unintentional outcomes of teaching and learning, because whether we like it or not, the way we behave and *communicate ourselves*¹⁵ within the school environment and directly to our students can, and will, have a marked affect on the students experience.

With this in mind my role as a teacher can hold the key to unlock many doors, my only concern at this point in time is that I acquire enough keys to ensure that enough doors are opened to accommodate my students.

I do not wish to be in the position of having my students knocking on doors without any answers. *I need to ensure that I do not stop learning myself, and remembering that I am on show, not the system.*

My students will rely on me for a whole range of influences, and I don't want to let them down. They will be my responsibility... my clients, and I have a professional obligations to deliver the goods. Whether they realise it or not, *I need to.*

My students will not be blank states, nor will they be closed books,¹⁶ but they will have their own perceptions and expectations. My responsibility is to identify such issues and address them, whether directly or indirectly.

My students will be a canvas upon which I will attempt to have *themselves* paint a picture of what it is they see and what it is they want to see... for all children are gifted and talented... we just have to identify in what ways and how this can be expressed.

What better way to prepare and educate students, than to teach them to express themselves, to experience and to learn.

“... today we are gradually coming to see that the central problem is social: it is the school we must look to and how education is being communicated, not the curriculum: and beyond the school there is society itself – our first concern must be the mechanisms in the school by which we deprive children of initiative, of a sense of their own value and potency, of their natural, self determined desire to learn. Those mechanisms are our speciality, and we need to learn how to turn ourselves from men (sic) teaching into teachers. When we know those answers, then and only then will it be useful for us to take up curriculum as an issue.¹⁷”

¹⁵ Benthall, J. and Polhemus, T. (1975). “The Body as a means of Expression”, Penguin Publishers, pp. 59-73. Also Thorne, B. and Henley, N. (1985). “Language and Sex – Difference and Dominance”, Newbury House publishers: Mass, pp. 254-270.

¹⁶ Reference to materials relating to the development of a personal teaching philosophy. Week 3 lecture Walker, R. and associated readings.

¹⁷ Barnes, D. (1977). “*From Communication to Curriculum*”, Penguin Books Australia, p. 190

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