

New Horizons in Education: A clearinghouse for ideas

Margaret Henry

Margaret Henry has enjoyed working as Associate Editor of New Horizons with a succession of Editors: Edward Broomhall (Tas), Bryce Saint (SA), David Massey (Qld) and Margaret Kiley (Canberra). Margaret's research/teaching career has included teaching young children, collaborating in programs with Indigenous families, investigating developmental human needs, and, for 20 years at QUT, fostering family-professional relationships in childcare and schools. In retirement she continues, with QUT colleagues, to inquire into early everyday activities and learning.

Earlier this year in New Horizons (as I will call the journal here), I referred to WEF, in the words of our constitution, as 'a clearing house of ideas' (Henry, 2006).

I want to pick up this theme again in this final summary. Where would one hope to see the structures of such a clearinghouse deployed for us to inspect? In our journal of course, and it is a hope that has been fulfilled many times. Some examples follow.

Discipline and ethics

Differing views are presented for us to examine in Issue 92 (June 1995) in Dan O'Donnell's 'Ethics and values in education: Can schools teach right and wrong?' and, in the subsequent Issue 93 (Dec. 1995), in David Massey's response: 'What rights and wrongs are we to teach?'

O'Donnell describes the continuity in educational values which in Queensland, for example, lasted for a hundred years until 1977-8 when 'the tradition of formal instruction and training in moral values came under intense scrutiny' (O'Donnell, 1995:25). The century-long regime of formal training had been explained in 1874 by a Queensland Headmaster as an 'approach to moral education amongst his boys...by way of appeals to conscience, example, lessons in the Scriptures and Civics and Morals, and corporal punishment (often generously dispensed)' (p.22).

O'Donnell himself reinforces the argument that:

values can and must be taught, formally and informally, as an integral part of daily work, like spelling, mathematical formulae, irregular French verbs...Inculcating sound and healthy habits of heart and mind and those values prized by the society which employs them is a duty of teachers, even more important than cultivating proficiency in the Three Rs. What is more, success is as assessable as growth in reading, spelling and arithmetical skills" (p.21).

Massey (1995), on the other hand, emphasises the importance of bringing values differences into the open for free discussion:

...not so much to draw attention to the limitations of past practices but to suggest that, in conceiving future practices, it is arguably important to be fully sensitive and fully responsive to all of the voices that deserve to be heard in our schools and communities. In other words, I am suggesting an approach to ethics education that begins with, and pays more attention to, the predicaments and vulnerabilities of existing members of schools and communities so that, by freely attending to one another, moral space (Kitwood, 1990) may be created between the participants thus promoting conviviality and flourishing lives, relationships, institutions and communities (p.56).

New Horizons, as clearinghouse, presents the opposing breezes blowing between the windows of these two authors' views as still exhilarating today. Fortunately we can continue to experience those breezes in the decades of New Horizons, whose issues remain in all the country's major libraries.

Early childhood

My own students, in my years teaching at the Queensland University of Technology, have frequently entered that clearinghouse. As people investigating the early years of life, they have, for example, been directed to "Young Children Learning: How Much? How Soon?" in Issue 103 (2000). Moving through this interconnected structure, originally an evening of short talks in Brisbane, students were able to pursue the question, currently back in the news, of how early the formal teaching of young children should begin. Students reading the journal were able to raise questions about *informality* as they shared their ideas on the need for "flexibility, accessibility and responsiveness" (Tayler, 2000), on the ease with which mathematical concepts are built up as Goldilocks encounters the Three Bears (Diezmann, 2000), on the clarification of the symbols of literacy in 'a note for Grandma' (Broughton, 2000), and on parents *along with* teachers as educators (Henry, 2000).

These concepts were extended to an even earlier age-range in the group of papers entitled "Child Care, We Care" (Issue 110, 2004). Here the presenters (Reddell, Brannock, Henry) invite readers to examine their varied offerings. Since, as they all say, child care is not going to go away, how can we ensure its quality?

Public/private funding

Also in Issue 110, 2004, Caldwell calls for a new agreement in the community about what constitutes public education. This agreement, he suggests, should be based not on sources of funding but on a commitment to public values, especially the values involved in the notion of "social capital". He invokes, in particular, the power of public-private partnerships. Among a host of advantages, such partnerships bring about superior educational outcomes over those of purely public systems (Caldwell, 2004: 9).

In Issue 97, Gwyther (1997) strongly disputes this. An ardent proponent of public funding, Gwyther cites studies claiming that 'there is no effect, either positive or negative, on educational outcomes' (p.48). After identifying a number of academics, right-wing think-tanks and multinational corporations on the private education wing, Gwyther states what he believes their policies will bring about: 'Equity will be replaced by marketing' (p.51). In a later issue of New Horizons (Issue 105), these ideas are expanded by Meadmore (2001) and Gwyther (2001) who on this occasion asks:

What exactly is a schooling system able to achieve in our current society? Is it to train and prepare students for a world based on competition and wide difference of power within workplaces? Or is it, rather, to assist them in their own processes of exploration and discovery in the social world around them? (p.77)

While 'their own processes', discussed by Vic Lorenz (2001) from the Catholic Education Commission, naturally include the 'faith orientation' (p.87) of Catholic schools, Lorenz's analysis also invites us to dwell on a variety of other factors which he sees leading to 'future funding fairness:' namely, the sector's 'geographical spread; its inclusiveness; its socio-economic comprehensiveness—rather than on any great emphasis on its independence and its "private" schools character' (p.87).

As Ramsey (2002) proclaims in Issue 107, discussing and deciding public/private funding policies will remain one of this century's great educational issues

Australian Indigenous education

Stepping through the clearing house of four recent New Horizons articles on Indigenous education allows us a fascinating vista of thinking and action (or inaction) on this topic.

Schools owned and run by Indigenous communities might be considered an example of the “private” schools mentioned in the last section, but in Issue 102 (June 2000) Downey & Hart maintain that ‘Aboriginal Owned Schools [Are] Still Exotic Mirages on the Australian Education Landscape.’ This, they say, is because:

The very idea that Indigenous people and their communities are able to govern their own schools continues to be an unthinkable possibility and is deeply embedded in the colonialising subconscious of education policy makers...In teacher education institutions around the country...white teachers are told how to interpret the ‘cultural traits’ of Indigenous children as a recipe to better instructions. Their own cultural biases never enter into the teaching and learning equation (Downey & Hart, 2000: 16).

In the special issue of New Horizons (December 2000), Tripcony surveys the issues manifested in Indigenous education as:

Issues of culture, of identity, of power, each manifested in various ways during our relatively short history of participation in Western education, and yet all infused both overtly and covertly with elements of racism (p.69).

To break down such racism and its effects, Tripcony sees two elements as vital:

Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, and education for all students about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, societies and contemporary issues (p.67).

To achieve these dual objectives Tripcony proposes differing pathways including:

multi-entry and multi-exit points that allow for ‘time out’ to consolidate learnings, attend to family or community responsibilities. It is our job as educators to acknowledge and value the life experiences of all learners, and to facilitate and guide learning that builds on those experiences (p.77).

Among the differing pathways to such learning, Michael Christie (Issue 103, Nov. 2000) looks at books, Bindi MacGill (Issue 109, Nov.2003) at educators.

Christie outlines his increasing understanding of three Aboriginal metaphors involved in learning in the Northern Territory where he works: Ganma, a place where different tides (or cultures) meet; Garma, an open forum where people work to bring their experiences and performances to one another; and Galtha, their negotiation and exchange of ideas. Now, instead of basing education on books compiled and presented to the student,

the printed text has shifted to become the end point of the educational experience: learning producing the text, rather than texts producing learning (p.16).

At present, it seems from the way Aboriginal students and teachers both treat the printed text that it is not read as a container of hidden meanings to be decoded, but more as a material record of an episode of collective meaning making in which we all shared (p.18).

Such sharing is brought out by MacGill in discussing the roles of AEWs (or Teacher Aides, or Teaching Assistants) not only as ‘values translators’ from one culture to the other, but also in terms of their full work-role. As MacGill notes of one AEW, ‘she taught me a range of cultural, educational and personal values that were enlightening on many levels’ (p.7). An AEW, for example, can explain to non-

Indigenous teachers the great importance of funeral practices which can keep students away from school for up to two weeks, and may be considered truancy by staff, but are part of 'an extremely important value as it is through the ritual of such a grieving process that Anangu people can begin to let go of their deceased' (p.8).

Two major difficulties that AEWs have are a continuing emphasis in the non-Indigenous community on individualism rather than the collective values of the Indigenous; and the lack of respect that AEWs continue to face: 'When the new teacher came to our community I sat at the back of the class for the first six weeks' (p.11).

Like the other authors mentioned in this section, MacGill appeals to the non-Indigenous community to broaden both its values and its methods:

Through the process of accepting diverse ways of practising shared values then we are closer to bringing about greater awareness and fulfilment (p.14).

New Horizons offers us important insights into the progression (or not) of these ideas in our community.

Saying what we think

As I wrote in presenting some stories of my mother, Clarice McNamara (Issue 104, June 2001), if a journal is to act as a clearinghouse for ideas, this can require the journal's staff to have steady nerves.

Exactly the appropriate combination of steadiness, quirkiness and courage were demonstrated by the then editor of New Horizons, Thistle Harris, in 1943. Thistle was a prominent botanist and lecturer to teacher trainees. As a twelve year old child I remember the occasion, and it is worth retracing once more in the present context.

The World Education Fellowship (then the New Education Fellowship) had held a five-meeting lecture series to which the public was invited, titled *Religion in Education*. At the end of the series, Thistle produced a special edition of *New Horizons in Education* giving, as Mother notes (McNamara, 2001: 29) 'the full text of each lecture and an appendix which recorded the reaction to the lectures of various sections of the community.'

In accordance with its philosophy, the Fellowship had gone to some trouble to secure a balanced sequence of speakers. For example, the Anglican Bishop Burgmann from Goulburn was one, freethinker Professor John Anderson of Sydney University's Philosophy Department another. It was the latter's talk which raised the roof in Sydney.

Anderson, quoted verbatim in McNamara (2001:29), suggested that:

The best approach to religion in education, the one most suited to the general capacities of the children, would be the treatment of religious writings as *literature*. The notion of 'sacredness' would be dispensed with; they would be treated as part of the subject-matter of a system of secular study.

John Anderson made it clear that to him the term 'religion in education' was an oxymoron. (Note, in the following quotation from his lecture, that "authoritative" at the time meant "authoritarian".)

...the encouragement of freedom of thinking and enquiry must inform the whole educational process, and it is to this that religion, as the setting up of the sacred and authoritative, is essentially opposed (p.30).

Following a brief reporting of this lecture in the press, Sydney exploded. Besides numbers of letter writers to the papers, members of parliament also took up the cause of saving our country's morals. A

member of the NSW Legislative Assembly drafted a resolution to be sent on to the University Senate 'as the body controlling the appointments of teachers' to determine "what limits should be imposed on the teaching staff of the university on religious or other controversial matters' (McNamara, 2001:32). For weeks Anderson was threatened with dismissal by many, defended by others. As the latter increased in number, the controversy eventually died down.

In reviewing the affair in the special issue of *New Horizons*, Thistle Harris wrote:

Professor Anderson was not to be allowed to affront public opinion; he made "amazing, grossly insulting and unphilosophic statements"; he "seemed scarcely conscious of the lengths to which his prejudice had carried him"—in other words he was not to be permitted to speak publicly on a matter because some people didn't like what he had to say! (McNamara, 2001: 30)

Following John Anderson, the next lecture in the series was delivered by Bishop Burgmann. So packed was the hall that NEF committee members 'had to clear a path among the crowd to let the speaker himself struggle through to the platform' (McNamara, 2001:31).

In her editorial, Thistle summed up the response to Bishop Burgmann that night from those who attended. She demonstrated, too, the Voltairian approach of the organisation. At the meeting, Thistle wrote,

Bishop Burgmann was accorded the same intelligent reception as the previous speakers, and the Chairman, Reverend C.T. Parkinson, a Vice-President of the NEF, stated in his introductory remarks that while he was not in agreement with Professor Anderson's remarks at the previous meeting, "he would go to the stake to defend the freedom of Professor Anderson or anyone else, to express his opinions" (McNamara, 2001:31).

Some time in the future, will we WEFers again have the chance to go to the stake for the defence of ideas? Will we again see a revived *New Horizons in Education* offering educational disputants the freedom to express their opinions?

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Contact

Margaret Henry
pmhenry@powerup.com.au