The Audacity of Sunrise

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In April 1988, an invitation was received to view a "School of the Future", the Sunrise School. I was immediately interested and read further. The organisation sponsoring it was reputable - none other than ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research). The accompanying information suggested that "ACER is committed to research into the use of technology within education." Reading further, I discovered that this "School of the Future" was to be located in the Museum of Victoria. There was no particular surprise in this until I discovered the reason this school had to be placed in the Museum. Apparently the sun cannot rise in present schools. "Students and teachers in conventional schools are subject to the culture of their schools and generally this does not support autonomous learning by the students or teaching by the teachers. For this reason, a school was not considered to be a suitable site for this project." (Neville 1988 p.2)

My interest had been aroused. I checked my diary and found I already had appointments. However the "School of the Future" was to have precedence and so appointments were changed.

The audacity of the challenge to schools was not in the rhetoric. We have read books by Ivan Illich and John Holt, who have argued that schools are bad places for young people. In fact the statement of John Holt "almost every child, on the first day he sets foot in a school building is smarter, more curious, less afraid of what he doesn't know, better at finding and figuring things out, more confident, resourceful, persistent, and independent, than he will ever again be in his schooling," (Holt 1971 p.23) has never left me as a specific educational challenge. The audacity of Sunrise comes in that ACER and the Museum of Victoria were not simply talking, but had actually established a significantly different educational setting.

After attending the opening function, listening to the speeches and subsequently meeting and talking with the people involved, it was clear that the challenge to existing schools was not just in the re-establishment of autonomous learning by students but was a challenge to rethink the nature of the curriculum, the relationship between teacher and student and even a new role for parents.

In late 1988 MLC picked up the challenging gauntlet thrown down by Sunrise and entered into an agreement with ACER. MLC was to have a Sunrise class in Year 7 in 1989. The agreement provided for both separateness and togetherness. While we were to evolve together, MLC was to develop its own particular curriculum based on themes from its current Year 7 courses. It was impossible to free the MLC Sunrise class from the existing school curriculum. Yet in a unique sense, the Sunrise class also transformed the other seven Year 7 classes and has subsequently led to substantial re thinking of our Junior Secondary curriculum and teaching methods. As well Sunrise thinking is rising up to Senior School and down into the Junior School.

While other schools are experiencing a top down reorganisation necessitated by the new VCE, the Sunrise class has meant that MLC has a bottom up transformation at the same time. Interestingly, this has not left the Middle School, Years 9 and 10, trapped between these converging forces. Rather, these reformations have encouraged Middle School to step out too, with significant new curriculum initiatives.

The MLC Sunrise class in 1989 could not be classified as an audacious experiment. Nevertheless, it was a significant departure from existing practice. Computers themselves were not new at MLC - there were already nearly two hundred in the school In fact the school has had a long history with this technology. In 1979 programmable calculators were introduced and our first word processor was purchased for our Business School students, not for our academic students. In 198O, MLC recognised the growth in use of computers by the community-and began teaching the social implications of. computers as a core subject in Middle School. At the same time a Year 11 Maths option of Computer Science was introduced and the school administration started to move towards computerisation. To assist with these moves, staff with special skills and training were recruited to help establish computing at MLC. In 1982 the Business School moved quickly to incorporate the new technology in its program and in such areas as Geography, Science, Special Education and Mathematics the focus of computer use changed to computer assisted learning. As this was extended and the value of word processing acknowledged, keyboarding as a compulsory subject for all Year 7 students was introduced in 1986. However, with the coming of 1988 and the Sunrise School, the slow entry curve associated with computers suddenly became a steep entry curve, taking on an exponential rather than a linear shape.

The history of that first year has been recorded already in the Sunrise Journal (Baker, 1990 p.5). Such was the success of this first class, that four new Sunrise classes were established in 1990. our three Grade 5 classes were to have their curriculum modified - all students in these classes were required to have a laptop computer for both school and home use. In the language of physics, a quantum leap had occurred.

Just as the morning sunrise evokes excitement and pleasure for those who rise early enough to see it, the MLC Sunrise School is equally commanding of attention for some. MLC has been inundated with requests from various people - teachers, media, lecturers - to see what is happening. Unlike David Suzuki who, in his new book 'Inventing the Future', dismisses computers as "information processors" (Suzuki, l990 p 198), we see knowledge not so much as being processed but as being constructed in the classroom. John Dewey's observation that the content of a lesson is the less important thing about learning, is relevant in Sunrise. Dewey and Sunrise are both concerned about experiences and attitudes.

In many ways the computer is both the image and the reality of l990. The written word as a fixed artefact, carved into stone not to be changed, is no longer appropriate in a society where knowledge is continually extended and changed, and where we expect from people both interaction and invention. In fact this is portrayed dramatically in the Bible. In the old Testament, we read of Moses descending from Mount Sinai with stone tablets on which the

Ten Commandments had been carved. That was the appropriate way for God to speak to that generation. However, to our generation, God sends a much more interactive and personal communication - He sends His Son whom He describes as the Word of God made flesh. As an alternative to a person, the computer must take second place. However, the computer is better than the linear and fixed structure in our books. on the computer, the text is moveable - it can be replaced, hierarchically organised and cross-connected in any way we choose.

Those of us who have grown up with books may be quick to query whether technology could have such a large impact. It is worth remembering that the book, as we know it today, has only been a significant phenomenon in certain cultures and only during a relatively short span of history. We do not have to go too far back in history to find that our culture was once an oral one. Information was passed from person to person, or from generation to generation, by oral communication.

Then came the alphabet/writing culture. This introduced a new form of conversation between people and between generations. It enabled a rapid acceleration in knowledge - scientists could build on the research of other scientists and people began to specialise in smaller and smaller areas of knowledge. Literature developed and increased. Postman (Methuen 1987p 14)has made the interesting assertion that the written word "is not merely an echo of a speaking voice, it is another kind of voice altogether."

To carry this logic one step further, a technological classroom may represent another transformation in our way of thinking, and certainly a dramatic change in our curriculum.

The idea of a changing curriculum is not new to teachers. The VCE and all the conflicts surrounding it, are a poignant statement of our society's lack of clarity about the content of education. It is simple enough to say we must teach the "basics", but it is difficult to identify what these basics are. Is the word "basic" to be interpreted narrowly as the 3 R's, or as building blocks upon which a person can become personally empowered to cope with a changing and assertive world?

Contrary to the opinion of some (eg Suzuki, 1990 p 195), our Sunrise experience has not been that computing is a solitary activity. While one event does not prove a theory, the following story is indicative of what is happening. on ~ our Grade S students sought assistance from the teacher to achieve something new with her computer. This was at the end of the last lesson for the day. The next day half way through the first lesson, the teacher was aware that all students in the class now had this new skill - that surely is effective communication, student with student.

Another statement by Suzuki also caught my attention. He said, "the challenge is to decide what information is worth anything and how to make use of that information, that is taught best by teachers"(Suzuki, 1990p 196). While I agree that teachers will continue to have a pivotal role in the classroom, interacting with students, I also want students to take more control of

the learning process. Again, our experience at MLC has been that students are curious, determined, energetic, skilful, discriminating learners.

At MLC, teachers in Sunrise view computers in the classroom as allies not enemies. They see themselves being freed to work and interact more individually with students. They are exhilarated by working with motivated students who sometimes do not even realise that the lunch break has come.

It is clear that teachers determine the success or failure of computers in the classroom. This means that teachers need encouragement and opportunity to "re-skill" - to become familiar and confident with this new technology. Teachers have already mastered one technology - that of the written text. Now teachers have to master a new technology, the computer text.

Sunrise at MLC is not an achievement but a process. It has more than lived up to the audacity of its challenge.

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