

President's reflections

“Rogan Jacobson, a Sydney-based English Teacher, was recently crowned Biggest Thinker for 2011 at the APG [*Account Planning Group, Australia*] Battle of Big Thinking. His winning idea suggests all secondary educational institutions should be razed and in their place, social community centres established to challenge the outdated methods of education in this country.”

APG asked Rogan a few questions about how his ‘education revolution’ might work and what role digital communications might play in the school of the future, and this was his response. I’m quoting his responses here as published on their website on March 4, 2011, *Are Educational Institutions responding to the challenges of teaching and learning in the 21st Century?*

Not even vaguely. We can see direct evidence of this in the failure to find agreement on several key educational issues over the last year. Educational institutions aren't sure what to teach (see the failure to agree on and implement a national curriculum), where to teach it (see the failure of the building program as part of the education revolution) and who will do the teaching (see the mass walk-outs of teachers and public furor over the MySchool website).

The response to the needs of the 21st century have been weak: to improve teacher quality (demanded by parents and contested by unions) we have simply added six months to the normal Dip Ed teacher training and called it a masters degree (and are toying with the idea of binning that altogether and simply offering a six month course to anyone from a ‘better’ degree who feels like teaching to cope with the staggering number of teachers who are retiring in the next few years), to build bigger buildings with white instead of chalk boards and to give some Year 9 students laptops and hope for the best.

Why do educational institutions continue to rely on traditional models of learning?

Two reasons.

1. Teachers are old (50% will be retiring in the next 3 years in NSW) and suffer the same aversion to technology as their contemporaries with about the same statistical take-up.

2. Because they do not have to account for their actions in the marketplace - if a company fails to have a website and engage in social network communication they lose share value, yet schools are overtly instructed to ban such sites and systems by their government department overlords. This means there is no incentive for teachers to ‘stay current’, no training for them to learn how to if they wanted to be and a direct system of penalization if they try to.

Why have schedules, disciplines and departments remained the same as in the 20th Century?

Schools have no incentive to change. Their funding is not tied to innovation, it's a political football that seems to vary with the election cycle. The right praise and fund independent schools while attacking public schools and gutting their funding, the left praise and fund public schools while attacking independent schools and gutting their funding. The right claim it's about market forces and individual freedom, the left claim it's about youth welfare and healing societal ills. Neither seems to talk about actual teaching and learning at all. The assumption schools therefore make is that they are in the business of teaching ‘key learning areas’ and that these are somehow universal ideas - not tied to the whims and fancies of their contemporary world. Result? Classrooms stay the same.

Why has the architecture of schools changed so little?

The same reason the architecture of prisons hasn't really changed. Schools are storage houses for young people, and require only a small set of physical spaces to maintain routine (though those spaces are happy to grow as much as funding will allow). The buildings themselves are set up for class work, library work or pastoral care (think religion, 'house' systems and other social work agenda). Students start at 8.30 and finish at 3pm. They did that before the communications revolution, during and after - in most cases sitting on exactly the same chairs.

How have learners changed?

21st century Learners are completely different creatures to their teachers. The average high-school student spends hours online communicating with hundreds (and often more) people globally every day - rain, hail or shine. My year 10 students today were born around 1995 - the year of the PowerMacs (for those a little older). When my student was born there were 16 million people online. By the time she was 10 there were 938 million people online - from 0.4% of the world population to 14.6%. Almost 2000 million are online today. She grew up with search engines, online shopping and computer games. She grew up with websites that augmented all media - whether it was a book, movie or song. There is no single media for her and the concept of looking at just one seems alien and strange. If she reads a book she will think nothing of hopping online and asking someone from another country what they thought of it as easily as she would ask the girl sitting next to her. She will regularly alert the planet if she woke up late, had a good time at the party Saturday or thinks kittens are cute. This is her world.

Now look at us. When her teachers were at school, they may have had 20 friends and that's about it. We scoured libraries for information, and because very good at crawling around shelves. If we wanted to experience other countries we flew there, and we had to think about prioritising our 'information output' because of the limited time we had with friends (we couldn't 'chat' to them all day at work, so we had to skip all those little bits of information about our lives that may well have brought us closer to each other).

Between teachers and students you therefore see a vast disconnect between valuing of digital products. Students love Facebook and Twitter because they communicate all the time - teachers hate them for the same reason. Students see the digital marketplace as their intellectual playground, but schools lock that reality out.

Modern students are connected to world events in a direct way, and live their lives as a multi-tasked experience. Teachers may see this as them being 'distracted' but many students I meet see this as normal.

Finally, students seem to be massively goal-driven at school in a way my generation, at least, was not. They see schooling as a ticket to and major determinant of their future. It's about the HSC mark, and what course you get into after that. With increased government concentration on tertiary sector expansion this isn't surprising. The 'keep them all at school until 18' mantra is now to be extended to 'keep them in Uni until 21'. Living with this reality means the students are usually very good at working out what they think contributes towards a final mark and what doesn't. They ignore what doesn't.

How important is it to balance online learning with offline activity?

Vital - everybody needs to get away from the screen now and again. This is why (outside of schools) we are demanding iPad2s and other mobile devices. The community wants to get back to the parks and public spaces. But not students.

Students are being pushed out of the community by the increased workloads/expectations and hours at school (and by that I mean in the building). Add to that the thought of at least 3 more years at Uni/TAFE and most students won't be a valid everyday part of their own communities until they are at least 21 years old.

This is a crime against humanity - especially in a digital age where the majority of academic work they engage in can be done from almost anywhere. We forget that students are also young people who learn well by copying successful adults - and when they see adults go from their office to the TV/dinner table and back to office again the next day they think this is how things must be. Students need teachers - that's the core relationship - and those teachers need to be 21st century citizens to be truly effective. But do students really need schools?"

<http://www.accountplanninggroup.com.au/articles/schools-are-storage-houses-for-young-people/>

While I don't agree with a number of points Rogan Jacobson makes he does raise a number of current issues for Christian teachers and those interested in school based education to consider such as:

1. Agreement on the National Curriculum, especially for High Schools.
2. Throwing Federal money at schools for buildings - the BER.
3. Public scrutiny of school results published on the internet - *MySchool* Website.
4. Changes to teacher training courses to meet projected shortages of teachers.
5. Putting Electronic Whiteboards and individual student computers in schools to promote learning and engage students.
6. As many as 50% of NSW teachers will be retiring in the next few years.
7. Teachers don't like technology. Schools are banned by Government and systems from being involved in social network communication which is now the way many kids communicate.

8. Funding is not tied to innovation in schools, rather it's a political football, tied to the election cycle. The result is, he says, that in schools the teaching remains the same.

9. School buildings also remain the same and the impact of the communication's revolution is not experienced by students in schools.
10. The 21st Century learner is different spending hours a day communicating online with possibly hundreds of people.
11. There are almost 2000 million people online today. These kids are multimedia resourced individuals not limited to books.
12. We had to "prioritize" our face-to-face interaction but our students don't. They can just "Tweet" all the time, except in class, at school (where we want to direct their attention to something else).
13. School is about getting the mark you want and the rest of school doesn't matter.
14. School workloads are keeping students away from interacting in the community or playing in the park.

15. In the digital age academic work can be done almost anywhere.

16. Students need teachers. This is a core relationship but teachers need to be 21st century people.

True! True! True! (Well, I am a teacher and it is relationships which teaching is all about.) Each person is known to God and important enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die for. As a Christian teacher, caring for my students is a core responsibility not because the DEC or my school tells me too, but because God thinks they are precious and need to hear the Gospel. This is the message TCF needs to keep communicating to other Christian teachers and support them in carrying out, maybe even by Tweeting to them.

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