1995

Four Book Reviews

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NOTES

For those interested in developing a similar programme for secondary schools or adults, all the activities are among those to be published in Talking With Confidence by Cambridge University Press, July 1995.

The contribution of the La Trobe University DipEd students who agreed to take part in this pilot trial is acknowledged with gratitude.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Fox, Mem. (1993). *Radical Reflections: Passionate Opinions on Teaching, Learning and Living.* Sydney: Harcourt Brace.

Mem Fox's "passionate opinions" are introduced to us as "ammunition" for teachers and parents "who are, this minute, engaged in fighting against the still current skills-and-drills mentality in the teaching of language arts". Her style is lively and anecdotal and her arguments are completely convincing. As the author of the best selling children's book ever in Australia, *Possum Magic,* as a sought after story-teller and performer, as a teacher educator and an academic, Mem Fox is uniquely and powerfully placed to attacked poor practice in language arts teaching, and this is a timely publication. The book challenges educators to think again about how and why we learn. It is most valuable for teacher trainees to read such a passionate and knowledgable account of language teaching and learning as an antidote to the often purely academic and joyless approach to teaching language offered in schools and tertiary institutions.

The book is a collection of articles and presentations on various aspects of language arts teaching which retain the charismatic quality of her live addresses. She has a valuable refreshing and irreverent approach to teaching and learning which is people oriented, not "intellectual", which affirms the all important affective aspects of learning, not just the academic ones. For example, she says, " we know intellectually that we should trust our students to learn - after all that's what we preach - but we're only human ..." (34). It is the humanity in the approach which shines through the book, inspiring the reader to "trust our students to learn". It is an affirmation of the role of significant people, ideas, books, words and excitement for effective learning. In "Notes from the Battlefield" she presents the strongest and best argued affirmation of the fun and the power of writing, and compares this with the lack of power in much school writing. "It seems to me a supreme arrogance on our part as teachers not to see that the granting of power to our children is politically and socially essential". (21) She attacks the "skills and drills" approach to teaching reading with energy and conviction in 'A Fox in

Possum's Clothing", comparing her own significant experiences sharing books and her own writing with the dry and joyless experiences children have with basal readers. In "There's a Coffin in my Office" Mem Fox buries "past mistakes in the teaching of English" (34) in the coffin in her office - "dead ideas, dead theories, and dead practices", and describes how she uses the coffin as a footstool. She is irreverent, too, about current academic research, suggesting that "a great Ph.D. dissertation topic would be "The Role of Love in the Mastery of Reading"; I hope someone tackles it soon" (52). Many other aspects of teaching and learning are covered in the articles, from the detailed affirmation of "read" writing experiences which are shared with significant people to issues of politics and sexism in literature. All topics are presented with conviction and enthusiasm which make the book a powerful and memorable addition to current writing about teaching, and I highly recommend it for teacher trainees and young teachers.

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Ingvarson, L. and Chadbourne, R. (Editors), (1994), *Valuing Teachers' Work,* Melbourne, ACER, 301 pp.

Much of the spectacular reform effort over the past decade in Australian schools systems has been directed to increasing efficiency with much less done to improve effectiveness or to make the lives of those involved in schooling more satisfying. *Valuing Teachers' Work,* like the ACER's 1989 publication by J Lokan and P McKenzie, is an important resource for teacher educators who seek to stimulate classroom teacher's thought and action on matters related to teacher evaluation. Many classroom teachers in Australia have not given informed thought to teacher evaluation since they began teaching. Many have not experienced satisfactory systematic teacher evaluation since they commenced their career. They have little idea of how appropriate teacher evaluation may help them become more effective teachers and make the experience of schooling

more satisfying, both for themselves and the children in their classrooms.

The papers in *Valuing Teachers' Work* provide a sound basis for challenging teacher's thinking on the topics raised. The book is divided into three parts: (1) Conceptual developments: models and approaches, (2) Contextual developments: state, national and overseas policies, and (3) Case studies of teacher appraisal and evaluation.

The editors offer a career development model of teacher evaluation which entails vertical mobility through various levels of teaching, graded in terms of professional knowledge and skill. Specific recommendations are:

- payment for the person, as opposed to payment for the position
- the adoption of developmental standards, rather than competitive standards, involving criterion-reference selection
- shifting the locus of authority for the setting of standards <u>away</u> from government and employers to teachers and teacher organisations
- summative evaluation be carried out externally by expert peers, using multiple sources of data
- new methods of teacher evaluation be investigated, such as the narrative and the teacher portfolio.

While the career development model offers exciting possibilities, its successful implementation hinges upon identifying and establishing a knowledge base for teaching. As the editors acknowledge, many researchers are attempting to define the main dimensions of such a knowledge base. M. Scriven's duties-based model is one attempt. He contrasts this with other forms of teacher evaluation, namely research-based, administrative, competency-based and peer evaluation, as well as reflective teaching. One of the benefits ascribed to the duties-based teacher evaluation is its facilitation of an upward path of professional development for all teachers. One of the problems of implementing the duties-based model, with its 10,000 word list of teacher's duties, is the extensive amount of data gathering required. The question can be asked whether it is feasible in terms of time and energy necessary. The paper raises another pertinent question: 'how does one set standards for <u>different</u> teaching situations'?

This question and others relating to the difficulties in actually setting standards for

teaching are addressed by W Louden's paper. Recognising the importance of context, together with subject content and personal experience, Louden advocates a probabilistic competency framework to provide for progression along a continuum of competence.

The politics of teacher evaluation are set out by D McRae in a paper which provides the background of Australian national developments. Chapters on developments in England and some Australian systems provide the context for the school level papers presented in Part 3.

This book has been used with success in teacher education courses during 1995. It has helped teachers develop their thinking about their teaching as well as the need for school systems in which they work to provide a system of fair teacher evaluation.

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Shears, L. (Ed.). (1995). *Computers and schools*. Victoria, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.

This is the book of the project. The project was set up by Dr Lawrie Shears, former Director–General of Education in Victoria, together with the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), and Toshiba Australia Pty Ltd. Dr Shears was responsible for both the project (as director) and the book (as editor and main author); Toshiba provided financial assistance and ACER provided office-space for Dr Shears as well as publishing the book. So what was the project about? No less than to describe the place and value of computers (or at least, 25 Toshiba laptop computers) in schools. An uncontentious, if somewhat ambitious intention.

Let me say at the outset that the book is mistitled and misconceived—it says little of consequence about the place of computers in schools, and it does not succeed in describing the place of computers or even laptop computers, in teaching and learning. In particular, the book offers little of substance to the teacher educator searching for current information on the place, role or value of computer technologies in schools.

This is a book that would have read better as a project report. The larger part of the text is given over to local and somewhat anecdotal stories

(case studies) about how laptop computers were introduced to individual schools; it is generally starkly written (methodically descriptive, yet unengaging); and overall, it fails to define an obvious readership (beyond the members of the original project). Even as a project report it has problems. At best, the cases reported here (ten in total) are brief and superficial; at worst, they either read like a teacher's daily diary; or are riddled with irrelevant padding (e.g. "xxx high school is a large dual campus coeducational school situated in xxx. Founded in 1924, it was the first government postprimary school on the...", p. 41).

The reporting of case study research, investigating computer use in education, has limited value for a wider audience unless the results of the research can be synthesised and projected as meaningful to those who are likely to read it. Case studies are of great interest and value when they are able to draw in the readers, allowing them to empathise with situations being described, and furnishing individuals with viewpoints, questions and ideas that help them reflect on and analyse their own situations, perhaps applying the same analytical frameworks mapped out by the author . However, in this book, we have a series of short reports (6–7 pages each), each written by an individual teacher (and a member of the project team), and which are bound together simply because they originated in the same project. The reports are hardly case–studies in an ethnographic sense (i.e. detailed naturalistic studies of particular cases over an extended time–frame); neither do they bear any coherent relationship, one to another; and, none transcend anything more than an adhoc report of the use of 25 laptop computers. Furthermore, the reports and particularly the editorial sections of the book, are filled with the usual hyperbole that accompanies enthusiasts' descriptions of the value of computers, peppered with the usual cries for greater amounts of funding to put more computers in schools, to train more teachers in their use and to allow for more children to reap more of the rewards from their application. Quite simply, the book lacks originality, analysis, coherence, depth and meaning.

The book is organised in three parts, reflecting the development of the original project. The first part reports the findings of a survey of computers and their use in Victorian schools; the second part compares some of these local survey findings with those from an international project; and the third describes the findings of teachers in various

Victorian schools concerning their use of laptop computers over "nearly two terms" (p. 139). Lets deal with each part of the book in turn.

In the first part, we are presented with the results of a survey of 176 Victorian schools, conducted in 1994/5. In fact, the survey actually provides an account of the guesses, estimations and viewpoints of these schools' principals (cf. last paragraph, p. 7). As such, the results must be severely limited in value. For example, questions were asked of school principals, to determine numbers of students that used computers during school hours and the numbers that used computers at home. Questions were also asked about the actual or estimated numbers (or percentages) of students who had access to computers at home. These are typically difficult questions to answer. How does one define 'access' to a home computer, for example—can access be defined simply by the existence of a computer at home, perhaps on a sporadic basis (e.g. Dad borrowing the use of an office computer); or is access achieved only when a computer is used by the child?

Also, apart from the semantic difficulties there might be in relation to interpreting questions posed—thereby threatening the content validity of the questionnaire (and there is no mention of a pilot test to test for validity)—there is a lack of information as to how the questionnaires were completed by principals. Were answers provided as a result of detailed surveys of children in each school; were they informed estimates, perhaps based on random samples, or were they simply principals' best guesses?

The survey and the results from it, are full of such holes. Lets take one such hole for closer inspection. In tables 10 and 11 (p. 13), we have a summary of principals' *estimates* of the percentage of students using computers at home and during school hours. So, for Victorian children, we are told that 18% of Year K to Year 2, are using computers 'daily' at home; 42% use computers 'occasionally'; and, 40% 'not at all'. Also, the vast majority of the same age–group are recorded as using computers during school hours, either 'occasionally' (75%) or 'daily' (21%); and, only 4% make no use of computers. However, we should not be expected to treat these percentages seriously since they are presented without accompanying explanation as to how the data were derived, whether as actual or estimated figures. Furthermore, and more importantly, these data reveal absolutely nothing about the level of usage—for example, what the children are doing

with the computers, why they are engaged in these activities and to what effect.

Let us take another pertinent example, as illustration of the difficulties inherent to this survey. The questionnaire asks principals to list the software used by teachers in their schools, for teaching purposes. The analysis of responses to this question, are tables (tables 16–17, pp. 16–17) of titles and *frequencies* of software mentioned. For both primary and secondary schools, we find that generic software packages (Claris Works and Microsoft Works) are mentioned the most (apart from Carmen Dan Diego, a simulation). The author concludes from this, that "beyond the generic titles such as typing tutors, spreadsheets, word processors and Logo, there is not a lot of software listed that would indicate wide use across subject areas within schools. This could also reflect the lack of access for students in subjects such as science, music or graphics, or even a lack of knowledge or access by teachers to the available software applications in those areas" (p. 16).

Such a conclusion only serves to draw attention to the difficulties of concluding anything of value from data describing frequencies of software titles mentioned (and this not even from teachers but from principals, speaking for teachers). Generic software is the very type of software that is not limited to any one subject or curriculum area, but relevant to all. So the high frequency with which this type of software is mentioned suggests, if anything, potentially wide use of computers across subject areas. Indeed, Professor Heppell indicates that the Information Technology components across the entire England and Wales National Curriculum could be delivered with such generic, open–ended, typically content–free tools (Heppell, 1993, p. 231). Even more pertinent is a finding from an international study (a study that Dr Shears himself refers to closely, further on in his book), that unequivocally shows:

> "that the integration of computers *(across all areas of the curriculum)* is clearly associated with the availability of educational tool *(i.e. generic)* software: the more educational tool software, the more integration" (Pelgrum & Schipper, 1993, p. 147), *(my italics).*

Furthermore, surely to draw conclusions about use of software in or across subject areas within schools, purely from questions that asked principals to list the software used in their schools is methodologically unsound. If the author wanted to draw conclusions of this type, it would be advisable to do so from data describing actual use of software, rather than infer it from questions that were not designed to produce such data. Lastly, it is simply erroneous to argue (whether by inference or directly) that schools that use only or mainly generic software are using computers less well, or are less desirable, than schools that make use of a wider range of software, generic and subject–specific. It is not what software is used but how well it is used, to enhance teaching and learning processes and/or outcomes, that matters. In this sense, at least, inferences regarding the amount and types of software used matter much less than descriptions of how that software is used.

Lets move on. The second part of the book compares some of the survey data obtained from Victorian principals with data obtained from an international survey conducted under the auspices of the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement), and with reference to some 21 educational systems (although Dr Shears, on page 17, reduces 21 to 19, for no apparent reason), (Pelgrum & Plomp, 1993).

This section provides some comparisons of interest. For example, we are told that both Victorian principals and those who responded to the IEA survey (who were not all principals of schools), listed "insufficient numbers of computers available" as their number one problem (in a ranking of 28 problems). Remembering that the author of this book is comparing data obtained from an Australian state in 1994 with data obtained from other parts of the world in 1989, (Pelgrum & Plomp, 1993), it is of interest that the number one problem for schools in a world–wide survey is one that Victorian school principals most strongly empathise with some 5 years later. This section of the book is full of such comparisons, describing similarities and differences between Victoria of 1995 and the rest of world in 1989, in the context of educational computer implementation. However, perhaps the main thing we should learn from these comparisons, is not the fact of the comparisons themselves but something that educational change theorists point out all too readily—that it is dangerous to make such comparisons in the first place, without also addressing the reasons for them (something which Dr Shears fails to even attempt), (Fullan, 1991). In this case, in the words of the researchers of the IEA study, we are not comparing like with like:

> "The influencing set of factors *(on the implementation of computers)* differs dependent on the stage of implementation in which a school or a country finds itself at a certain moment. Therefore differences are found between countries when comparing the influencing factors at a certain point in time. These differences can, amongst other things, be explained by the countries' policy on Information Technology in Education. Differences in stages of development are found when comparing the situation within one country over a period of time" (Reinen, Pelgrum & Plomp, 1995, p. 7) *(my italics).*

That is, it is not that Victorian school principals are indicating that we still facing the same problems of computer implementation we did some five years ago; but rather, that the cycle of implementation in computer education in Victoria, is at a point now that other countries and states of the world might already have experienced. Different countries are likely to experience the same implementation cycles but at different times and for different durations; thus, the use of computers in Victoria in 1995 is likely to be at a different stage in implementation, than the use of computers elsewhere in the world. However, it would seem that Dr Shears misses this point altogether, preferring to focus on reporting more obvious, if somewhat meaningless (given the five year gap in the data) comparisons of numbers—particularly, that Victoria of today has a lower (better) ratio of children per computers for teaching, than other countries of the world possessed in 1989 (pp. 10, 21).

The third and final section of this book is given over to reports on ten case–studies, each written, as far as can be ascertained, by those individuals responsible for administering the project in respective schools. As already indicated, these are mixed in quality; but importantly, they lack overall coherence and meaning. They read as a series of short, unconnected, project reports (rather than detailed case–studies in an ethnographic sense), and consequently there is a strong need for an editor to distil the more salient and valuable findings from these reports, and to attempt to give them meaning in the context of the original aims of the project. However, this doesn't occur. Instead, in at a concluding chapter, we find a series of points as a summary of the views of "teachers, students and parents" (p. 125). These points are of the order, "laptops broaden staff horizons"; "spellchecker overcomes difficulties"; "laptops create positive changes in learning and thinking"; "work looks better"; "cannot touch–type very well"; "work is neater and spelling better" (pp. 125–127).

In conclusion, there are a few remaining observations that should be noted. For example, this book lacks any references to wider reading or supporting argument; this fact alone suggests an insular and inward–looking approach—a book that professes "to describe the present position in respect to the use of computers in schools" (p. 2), amongst other things, should not be characterised in this way. Also, this book is about an innovation—the implementation of computers in education—but little of what we read seeks to account for this innovation, even in terms of Victorian schools. Indeed, in the context of educational innovation, it surely must be considered questionable to comment thus, "it *(the project)* has 'forced' teachers to confront the technology and, to their credit, they have responded well" (p.31) *(my italics).* If we have learnt one thing about innovation and educational change, particularly in light of the implementation of computers in education, it is that innovation is not something that can be done to others and also succeed (Fullen, p. xiv).

One very perplexing point repeatedly made by the main author, Dr Shears, is that this book makes "no attempt to ascertain the nature, quality or amount of the usage" (pp. 11, 12, 140) of computers by teachers for teaching or by learners for learning. This really is a strange point to make in a book which is centrally concerned with computers in schools.

Computers and Schools reads as an unpublished project report—and in all senses, would have served its authors better, if it had stayed as such.

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Maltby, F, Gage, N. L. & Berliner. (1995). Educational Psychology: *An Australian and New Zealand perspective.* Brisbane: John Wiley & Sons.

This textbook in Educational Psychology is divided into five parts: (a) background, (b) student characteristics, (c) learning and motivation, (d) teaching skills and strategies, and (e) assessment, evaluation and testing.

The relatively brief section on background describes research approaches on which educational psychology is based, and the objectives of teaching.

Part 2, on student characteristics, begins with a chapter on intelligence discussing the ways it has been defined, conceptualised and measured, and the research evidence on a number of issues of interest in the area of intelligence. This is followed by a single chapter on the development of cognition, language and personality. The section ends with two chapters on human diversity and schools, which cover cultural factors, gender, and children with special needs.

Part 3, which discusses learning and motivation, begins with a chapter mainly on operant conditioning. This is followed by a chapter on cognitive processing which surveys a wide range of issues including short-term and long-term memory, schemata, problem-solving, metacognition, and transfer of learning. The final chapter in this section investigates motivation, factors related to it, and how it influences learning.

The fourth part, on teaching skills and strategies, contains three of the longest chapters in the book. The first is on lecturing and group discussion. The second is on individual instruction, independent learning and some of the less traditional forms of instruction now gaining popularity, such as distance education and computer assisted learning. The third chapter is about strategies that can be used in the classroom to encourage learning and to manage behaviour.

The final part of the book, on assessment, evaluation and testing, is a nicely integrated section by a single author beginning with a chapter which introduces some of the basic concepts such as norms, reliability and validity. The second chapter critically evaluates standardised tests — their use, abuse, and interpretation. The final chapter, and one of the largest in the book, discusses the use of formal and informal methods of assessment of how well students have attained curriculum objectives.

There are nine authors, each responsible for chapters within his or her own areas of interest. The book is attractively presented and easy to use. At the beginning of each chapter, at the beginning of each section, and at the beginning of the book, overviews are given of what is to follow. Each chapter also ends with a summary. Levels of headings are also given at the beginning of each chapter. These headings as well as marginal key terms help give you a sense of where you are the chapter. There is also quite a comprehensive glossary of terms at the end.

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