

REMARKS MADE BY DR H.C. COOMBE ON THE OCCASION OF THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF CHIRION  
COLLEGE, BIRCHGROVE \_ SATURDAY, 1ST SEPTEMBER 1973

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I feel somewhat of an imposter here opening a school because through my life, for one reason or another, I have gradually become convinced that educated people have become educated in spite of their schools rather than because of them.

This was a view which I began to form when I was a scholar. I cannot say that I was a distinguished scholar - indeed my passing from the school was received with equanimity, indeed with relief, by most of my instructors. It was, I recall, my first report which said "ought to do better - is careless and dreamy". I have rather treasured the "dreamy" bit but I did not ever do much better. Indeed I remained one of those scholars who are persistently regarded as a nuisance.

Subsequently I became a teacher and I had an interesting, rather frustrating and, thank God, short career as a member of the Education Department of Western Australia. My recollection of that period is one in which I battled in hopeless frustration against the views of Inspectors and departmental authorities who seemed to imagine that education was something, as I heard it expressed the other day, where you "tell 'em and test 'em".

The approach to curricula was incredibly hidebound. I recall teaching a class of early teenagers who were the least distinguished in their age category and who, like many Australians, were singularly tough and sceptical about what they were told by those in authority. They brought this toughness and scepticism to bear on the poetry embodied in a department anthology about the beauties of which it was my task to instruct them.

After struggling to persuade them of the joys of "wandering lonely as a cloud" and being met with considerable derision, I decided that there was not much future in the struggle.

That was back in the late 20's when my generation were becoming rather excited by T.S.Eliot who we saw as a kind of spokesman for the "counter-culture" of the time. It is true, like many prophets of the counter-culture, Eliot subsequently became a stalwart of the establishment. Still at that time we honoured him as a symbol of revolt against the crass materialism of the age. Consequently, in a kind of desperation, I tried reading "The Wasteland" and other earlier works of Eliot with the class who found the "wandering clouds" less than exciting. To my astonishment the response was tremendous. These tough case-hardened characters marvelled to find a poet who wrote about the "smell of steak in alleyways" and about the morning coming to consciousness with the stale smell of beer. Suddenly they were aware that poetry need not be precious and remote from their lives.

It was an exciting beginning but not so far as it concerned my relationship with the school and the Inspector. Our argument was vigorous but led nowhere. He had never heard of Eliot. From what I showed him of Eliot's poetry he was convinced he would dwell no higher than in the very slums of Parnassus. Clearly such stuff - obviously bad for me - was utterly corrupting for my tender charges.

After lunch he took over the class to show me how it should be done. He chose a poem from the prescribed anthology - a piece of traditional doggeral about English hunting scenes, with pink jackets, hounds and tally-hos and the rest. He proceeded to talk to the boys and to ask questions about this poem. The exchange took a turn which warmed my vengeful heart. It ran something like this : "What were these men hunting?" "Foxes." "Does anyone go hunting in Australia?" "Yes." "Do they hunt foxes?" "No." "What do they hunt?" "Usually brush." ( In Western Australia a Kangaroo was called a

'brush'.) At this point there was a giggle at the back of the class. What the Inspector did not know was that 'brush' also was contemporary slang for a girl. The Inspector asked one boy if he went hunting brush - "Oh no Sir" said the boy; "I'm not old enough!" The poor man went on to inquire deeply into the technique of hunting brush while the giggles became more and more pervasive until finally I had to come to the rescue - much against my will. When dealing with the natives it is important to know the vernacular.

That experience illustrated for me the barriers which can exist between teacher and taught and helped convince me that one not prepared or permitted to experiment with rarely get past them. For this and other reasons I left the teaching profession thinking it might be easier to mould the future of the economic system than that of the rising generation. The Department was very co-operative in facilitating my departure. It is interesting to think of the things that Australia might have been saved if the education system had been different.

However, today it is more exciting and rewarding to be involved in the education process whether as a student or teacher. There seems to be a new flexibility, a new prospect for innovation and an encouraging ferment of scepticism the sacred cows of the traditional pedagogy. At such times significant change can occur. I genuinely hope that this school will be in the van of such change.

The infusion of new resources offered by the Australian Government to the education system should at least make possible generally, rather than for the chosen or fortunate few, the smaller classes, the individual attention and the better teaching aids which dedicated teachers have been demanding for so long. For my part I hope it will do more than that - that it will also make possible greater diversity in both the objectives and the techniques of education. In the past there has been a depressing uniformity imposed on the State educational system, frequently in the face of determination on the part of teachers to break away from that uniformity. The opportunities to experiment and develop a different philosophy of education which ideally the private schools could have offered have been realised only to a negligible degree. Where there has been imagination, it has generally been stultified by lack of resources, and where there have been resources, those concerned have often imposed or accepted limitations on their field of recruitment and on their approach to the content of education dictated primarily by the identification with and the desire to preserve existing privileges.

Why should not both State and private school systems offer a choice of educational method? Why should not both build on the opportunity to innovate and to experiment? Why should there not be regional, local and individual school and even class differences in the curriculum itself.

Here I come back to my conviction that people who are educated have often become educated in spite of rather than because of their schools. It is because of that conviction that I am deeply impressed by the arguments of those contemporary educational philosophers who argue that education should be "de-schooled". This does not, I believe, mean that schools should be abolished, but rather that teachers and others involved in education should recognise the limit of the role which the schools can properly play.

The educationalists are rebelling against the tendency to see the school and the teacher as the channel through which experience shall be received - and therefore by which it shall be ordered, shaped and related to the world in general. Against this tendency it is right and proper for the young and those who care for them to rebel. As I see it, it is the task of the teacher and the school first to equip the young with the indispensable tools of contemporary life, and secondly to organise their initial experience of some aspects of that life. It may be reasonable in this organising to order and to graduate that experience to the years and the capacity of the young (although even that, I believe, should be done with full awareness of the toughness and resilience of the child and the child's mind). But to modify, water down and interpret that experience is, in my view, to act presumptuously. It is to

interfere with the freedom to explore, the freedom to discover and the freedom to judge which, I believe, is the fundamental right of every evolving creature at whatever stage of its life - and above all the right of the human child. Children are entitled to experiment, to experience the world, its wonders and its terrors simply and directly with, if possible, no intermediary.

Thus, for instance, I am greatly concerned with some aspects of contemporary school practice which tries to bring to the child experience of the arts - of theatre, music, painting and sculpture - through the filtering mechanism of the relationship between child and teacher. As observers, and even now practitioners and creators (and any child is a practitioner and creator in the arts), children should meet the arts face to face. If intermediaries are unavoidable, those intermediaries themselves should be artists - those who by their practice observed, can communicate the excitement involved in creative activity in the arts. In the arts above all one can learn only by doing.

The participation of Charles and Barbara Blackman in this enterprise is a guarantee that this school, those who have established it and those who will conduct it, will be motivated by the kind of humility essential to this approach to the child and will be inspired by the dedication which such an approach demands.

I am therefore honoured that you asked me to be with you and I am proud to declare this school open.

Source : Australian National Library, Manuscripts, Dr H.C.Coombs NLA 25/201