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Thinking People: Information, Technology, Learning

Professor Stewart Marshall, Head of School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Mr. Neil Hanley, Senior Lecturer in Mass Communications

Monash University

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"In talking about the revolution that we are now experiencing, I am often confronted by people who insist that all we get from computers is information, in comparison to the great value-added dimension of wisdom which evidently flows from the book. While I have no difficulty in making a distinction between data and information on the one hand and the human component of interpretation and wisdom on the other, I cannot understand why the charge is levelled specifically at the computer. Print contains no more knowledge or wisdom than does the digitised image."

Dale Spender, Nattering on the Net, p.xxvi.

INTRODUCTION

The title ‘Thinking People: Information, Technology, Learning’ is deliberately ambiguous. As educators, we must strive to achieve the best from our students. This means thinking about them. How they learn and what they learn go together. We want our students to be people who think, and think effectively and profoundly.

When you consider the question “Whither Communication Education in Asia?”, three intertwined quality factors are essential in terms of provision of services and desired outcomes: Information, Technology and Learning. What we can provide, who we can reach and how we can reach them are critical issues. As educators, we have the privilege of living at a time when we have the opportunity to expand modes of experiencing education, to explore new ways of making learning more flexible, accessible and effective. We have the opportunity to produce informed and creative graduates who have the skills to enrich their societies and who have access to continuing learning (education for life) to maintain this process.

Distance Education or Learning at a Distance has been seen as a ‘lower’ kind of education in a world where being in class on time was ‘proof’ of learning. More recently, Distance Education and Open Learning have become accepted modes of learning. Now we can eliminate the tyranny of distance by having people who are geographically separate and in different time zones in the same class. We have a new ‘learning space’
clearly essential as we move towards an information-based society. As Drucker (1993, p.201) points out

in the knowledge society, subjects may matter less than students’ capacity to continue learning and their motivation to do so. Post-capitalist society requires lifelong learning.

1996 is the European Year of Lifelong Learning, and in the UK the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce is coordinating “The Campaign for Learning”, a five year campaign to market learning, with the support of Government, industry and education. But university learning is one small part of this campaign, just as it is one small, but very important, part of lifelong learning. The NBEET “Candy Report” (Candy, Crebert & O’Leary, 1994, p. 186) points out that placing the two concepts “lifelong” and “learning” at the centre of undergraduate programs has significant implications.... The undergraduate experience (vital as it is) must be seen within the total lifelong and lifewide context of each person’s learning experiences.... Putting learning at the centre of the undergraduate experience casts a different light not only on teaching, but on the role of other university services and functions (such as the library, the computer-based education facility and the relationship between the university and its graduate body or convocation) in pursuing the role of facilitating learning.

So, with “lifelong” and “learning” at the centre of undergraduate programs, the role of academic and other staff employed by the university is to serve as facilitators of learning, not deliverers of education. A great deal of emphasis in the curriculum is placed on students developing the skills which they require for learning, e.g., the skills to access, process, synthesise, and communicate knowledge. The curriculum must recognise the prior learning of the students and must also develop the skills and attitudes required after graduation.

COMMUNICATION, GLOBALISATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The introduction of lifelong learning in the context of mass higher education has resulted in the need for more flexible modes of learning.
Higher education institutions are increasingly making use of distance education as a mode of facilitating learning throughout the developed world. A survey of OECD countries by Jenkins (1995, p. 427) revealed that the proportions of universities offering some distance education courses are: France - 40 per cent; Canada - 61 per cent; UK - 75 per cent; Sweden - over 90 per cent; USA - over 90 per cent.

The convergence of telecommunications, publishing, television and computing, is creating a media environment with enormous implications for flexible, lifelong, mass higher education. As the price of electronic equipment falls, access to these knowledge media will increase. A survey of a large sample of all the UK Open University students revealed that 65 per cent of students had access to a computer in 1995, and that 45 per cent of the remainder would consider buying one (PLUM, 1995). It would be reasonable to assume that by the turn of the century, 95 per cent will have access. In the document *Victoria 21- Into the Information Age: The Connected Community* (1996, pp.5-6) the Victorian Government claims considerable success in achieving its objective to:

> ensure that all Victorians - regardless of place of residence, age, income and education - have access to quality online information technology and the necessary training and education to enable them to use it..... (and) by the end of this year, Victoria will be the world leader in the provision of Internet access for its citizens.

It is also reasonable to assume that shortly after the turn of the century, the price of telecommunications will have fallen dramatically and pricing will no longer depend on distance. There is evidence of this trend in Australia at the moment. This will enable universities and other educational providers to connect students to staff and other students through e-mail and computer conferencing. Educational programs will be available electronically, accessed by students and others worldwide. Australian students will be studying material produced overseas. Payment of fees will no longer be necessary to receive educational programs, but fees will be required for assessment and credit towards an award. Necessarily, there will be a greater degree of crediting of study assessed through other institutions. There will be a small number of electronic libraries providing required electronic copies of texts on request. Educational institutions will still have libraries, but these will largely serve as learning support centres with easy access to the larger national and international electronic libraries and facilities for printing.
hard copies of downloaded material. A large proportion of students will study at home or from their workplace. Students will increasingly obtain the knowledge they require from national and international sources outside the university in which they are enrolled.

Many countries in the less developed world perceive danger in this globalisation of communication and higher education. Guy (1995) writes of his concern about the intrusive effects of Western curricula and pedagogies which have been imported into Papua New Guinea with little accommodation to indigenous culture and learning. Evans (1995, p.266) points out that:

many new forms of open education which are mediated via the Internet, or through satellite broadcasting, cannot be achieved with any substantial accommodation to local conditions ..... there is little likelihood of a myriad of small, local, traditional cultures being nurtured within globalisation

But does globalisation necessarily mean the spread of western institutions and cultural uniformity? Guy (1995, p. 79) is optimistic, because

the increasing prominence of post-colonial discourses encompassing indigenous voices, local perspectives and epistemologies, together with the post-modern shift within Western academic disciplines that define the field, open up new possibilities and opportunities for understanding and organising distance education in the South Pacific.

Also optimistic is Edwards (1994, p. 11), who maintains that with globalisation there comes “a pressure for local autonomy and identity” and “the affirmation of local, regional, ethnic identities”, and that “the integration of the globe reconfigures rather than supplants diversity”. McQuail (1994) uses the term 'transculturation' to describe the interchange between cultures. The expectation that the globalisation of communication will destroy indigenous cultures fails to acknowledge that other forms of communication between cultures have been in existence for some time, and the fact that cultures survive such transculturation is evidence of cultural 'resistance' and 'adaptation'. Collins (1991) discusses the relationship of U.S. culture and Canada’s distinctive identity. The U.S. media has been involved in Canada for over 100 years, yet there has been a generalised resistance to the adoption of this
foreign culture. Similarly, it has been noted that television broadcasting has extended over national boundaries in Europe for some time (Jacka, 1990). As Europe currently resists attempts to create a regional identity, it would seem that this cultural invasion has failed to dramatically alter individual nationalities within the area.

Both McQuail (1994) and Ang (1991) discuss the ability of communities to redefine the material that is received. Ang terms this process 'indigenisation' (1991, p. 6). Audiences will interpret media messages in different ways, very much dependent upon their circumstances and positions in society on the basis of class, gender or ethnicity (Beng, 1994; Kishore, 1994; McQuail, 1994). Our educational aim must be to assist learners to be capable of exercising choice and obtaining from the knowledge media that which they deem culturally appropriate and useful.

Education is about opening up new horizons; about seeing problems in new ways; seeing new possibilities and new opportunities. Education is also about getting the skills and knowledge to seize those opportunities. So it's about enabling you to change the way you interact with the world. But it is also about recognising and respecting the different ways of seeing the world:

The task for researchers and educators in a post-colonial world is to develop better understandings of the relationships between difference, identity and power and to develop effective pedagogies which acclaim difference as the basis of genuine democratic forms of social and educational organisation. (Guy, 1995, p. 81)

COMMUNICATION STUDIES AT MONASH UNIVERSITY

In Australia, communication studies is split between the humanities and the social sciences. To the extent that it appears at all in the high school curriculum, it appears as part of the English curriculum. In universities it also frequently appears as a humanities field, as “an arts course of vocational relevance” (Irwin, 1989, p. 45), whilst for the ARC it is a social science. It is this splendid duality which makes communication studies so useful in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. It can be theoretical or practical; vocational or non-vocational; art or social science; and because communication defines humanity, communication
studies can be the study of everything human. Almost as inclusive as philosophy, but a lot more useful.

The usefulness of communication studies is clear when one considers that the information industry already represents six per cent of the world economy and is growing at twice the rate of the rest of the world economy. But communication studies is not only useful for those who wish to pursue a career in the information, communication and related industries, it is also useful for any profession because all professionals in the future will need the knowledge and skills which it provides. It is in recognition of this that our BA in Communication course comprises not only a communication core, together with a broadening arts sequence, but also a specialisation sequence in which students can choose to study subjects related to their chosen profession (e.g., marketing, management, tourism, or business computing).

In Increasingly in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences we are including the development of communication skills and knowledge in our objectives for courses and generally modifying courses to meet the needs of students facing a rapidly changing world in the information age. For example, the BA in Journalism recognises that future journalists:

- will no longer work in just one of the media, i.e., print, TV, radio, but instead will be required to work across all three;

- that they will no longer be appointed to a specific media organisation but will be freelance, selling material to various media organisations;

- they will no longer write for a specific publication and audience, but will need to adapt the same story for several publications and audiences.

Thus, our journalism students, our communication students, and indeed, all our students, will develop the communication skills and knowledge which they will require in the 21st century - the skills they require to access the information superhighway, to critically process that information, and then to act upon it. In this way our students will be prepared for a changing world; will be prepared for personal change; and will be prepared and able to change the world. These skills, attitudes and values are at the core of the curriculum, in recognition of the fact that
these are essential for the empowerment of the individual to act in a socially responsible manner and to be prepared for lifelong learning.

THE NETFACE PROJECT AT MONASH

Monash’s experience in the NetFace project is a good example of cultural rather than technological determinism (Winston: 1990). In this project, technologies have been used as enabling tools, skills and techniques have been developed to expand learning space and bring a diverse range of people together. Clearly this process has no reason to belong to any country or institutional location. Indeed it is variously local, regional and global in potential scope and application. The mind, as Paul Levinson has argued, is ‘at large’ in the technological age (Levinson, 1988). Education is now ‘being digital’ (Necroponte, 1995), virtual communities are forming (Rheingold, 1994) and by ‘nattering on the Net’, women are empowering themselves in cyberspace (Spender, 1995).

NetFace has come a long way since 1992. One of the authors reported at the AMIC conference last year on how NetFace had originally been conceived as a piece of communications software which would:

1. support remote learners in student-student and student teacher interactions

2. facilitate information access, retrieval and transfer for those learners (Hanley, 1995).

The author also reported his own more ambitious aim: to converge on and off-campus and mixed mode educational populations in a ‘virtual’ class, one where polylogue and collaboration would be important components in the learning process. An update might suggest one way that works in responding to ‘Whither Communication Education in Asia?’

In 1995 there were some 50 Monash subjects online. In 1996 there are over 80 subjects online in first semester. In 1995 the largest online class (GSC1402: Media Studies) totalled 280 students. Anticipated enrolment in 1996 is 660. The number of students in subjects this author teaches online has risen from 360 in 1995 to an estimated 1240 in 1996.
Who are these people? They are on-campus students at two Monash campuses; Gippsland and the new ‘electronic’ campus at Berwick. They are distance education students who attend study centres or login from home. This group includes not only students studying in regional and remote areas of Australia, but Students studying Monash subjects through Technology Management Centre in Singapore. Another group to go online is Year 12 enhancement students, talented final year secondary schoolers who take two university subjects in Year 12. Then there are mixed mode students; those who combine on and off-campus study.

Subjects and degree programs are no longer bound to a physical place. People do not have to go to this place to experience education. Education can go to them. We have flexible learning.

‘Critical mass’ is also an important concept. In the early stages of development, NetFace supported relatively small groups: 20-50 students. Interactions between students and staff were, in general, intermittent and NetFace was generally viewed as an ‘extra’, a ‘bonus’ in the learning experience. Staff were learning the techniques to use this technology effectively, students often didn’t have the necessary equipment in their homes and could only attend a campus or study centre to participate on an irregular basis. Training of both staff and students in using NetFace was limited. Now a network of knowledge, both for staff and students has been established. Many students have the equipment to access NetFace. NetFace has become more central to how students might learn, whether they are on or off-campus.

An example of making NetFace more central to learning is GSC1901: Introduction to Communication Studies. This subject is offered at first level in first semester by the School of Humanities and Social Sciences and is a core subject in various single and double award and degrees in Humanities and Social Sciences, Communications, and Journalism. It is also popular with Business, Education, Applied Science and Visual Arts students.

All students study NetFace as well as use it as part of consideration of communications technologies. The result is not only online literacy, being able to use NetFace, but development of theoretical perspectives and research techniques at the beginning of university education. All students receive the same materials and are encouraged to be part of the
'class' wherever they are. There are formal class times but students are encouraged to participate at other times or at times which suit them best. I have observed that Singapore students usually login during the evening, Australian time. Distance education students in Australia like Sunday mornings.

Using NetFace requires an adjustment as an academic. You role moves from teaching (although this remains a function) to facilitation and moderation. Usually you remain part of the group; agreeing, suggesting, challenging. Only occasionally is intervention necessary (for example, when people’s online conduct is regarded as threatening to others).

What is important here is that we have recognised that computers and software are social and cultural tools and have given students the space to learn about them and learn with them. We should also be learning from the students.

We offer this analysis, our observations and experiences to indicate what can and might be achieved in terms of communications education.

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