

Teachers the world over struggle with low levels of student engagement in learning – what Leo KEEGAN calls the ‘Who Cares Anyway’ factor. Keegan explores the reasons why students are often unmoved by the classroom experience and proposes ways teachers might evoke a greater degree of emotional involvement and response.

Year 10 students from Red Bend Catholic College, Forbes



‘What sort of citizens will we be?’

‘collective imagination exercise’ about what life was like within their respective electorates. They were told that in 20 minutes they would have to present a short oral report to the whole class about life in their electorate.

The students were instantly transformed. Gone was the apathy of yesterday. The speakers from the rich electorates had taken on the persona of the rich and famous while those from the poorest electorates were visibly angry at the situation in which they found themselves.

In addition to reporting about their lifestyle, the speaker from each electorate had to indicate what they believed should be done about the situation and who they thought would be their political allies in a democratically elected parliament.

The students/voters were given time to form ‘political’ parties and eventually each electorate ‘sent’ a representative to the Lower House of Parliament. The 10 ‘representatives’ were given a few minutes to find a leader who could demonstrate that he or she had a least five loyal supporters. The teacher, in the role of Governor General, then formally commissioned the leader as Prime Minister to govern ‘Justicecountry’ for three years.

The Prime Minister, with the support of the poorest six or seven representatives in the Lower House, introduced a bill to redistribute income. The remaining 20 students formed an Upper House. Bills from the Lower House could only become law if they were passed by the Upper House. The students were issued with a one-page ‘constitution’ in which it was stated that the main role of the Upper House was to act as a House of Review. In

order to effectively carry out this role, the members of the Upper House had voting rights in proportion to their electorate’s income.

This meant that the Lower House and the Upper House were on a collision course from the start of the exercise. One option available to members of the Lower House was to use a referendum to abolish the Upper House. The ‘horse trading’ and power plays exhibited by the students in this situation were remarkably similar to those we witness played out in our media on a daily basis.

Over the subsequent years I have used this simulation exercise with many groups, ranging from junior secondary to university level. The students always become deeply involved – some to the point where long-standing friendships with classmates are strained to breaking point.

How does the simulation work?

Recently I used this simulation with 40 year 10 students from Red Bend Catholic College in Forbes, NSW. A whole day was set aside for the exercise and it was stressed to the students that the day offered an opportunity to do some in-depth thinking and to make decisions about a real issue – albeit in a simulated environment.

The students were told that their teachers were under strict instructions not to influence the day’s outcomes and that the state of Justicecountry at 3.30 that afternoon would be a direct result of their own decision-making.

At the end of the day I asked for volunteer students to come to the front of the assembled gathering and make some concluding statements. Elizabeth, who had played the role of Prime Minister, made the following statement:

“I must say that I feel sad. While I agree with the Leader of the Opposition that we

Several years ago I was teaching a topic on social inequality to a year 11 General Studies class and found myself frustrated by my inability to evoke an emotional response. I had been using the latest figures on Australia’s wealth and income distribution to start the discussion, and I was disappointed by the students’ lack of engagement with what I considered to be a major moral issue facing our society.

After some reflection, I came to the conclusion that the students had no reason to be emotionally involved in something they viewed as ‘just another topic’ to be learned for the HSC exam. I decided to try a strategy which would involve the students’ imagination, in the hope that it might result in the students experiencing, at least vicariously, some of the frustration and powerlessness experienced by the dispossessed in our society.

The Justicecountry simulation exercise

The following morning I divided the class into 10 groups of three, which I referred to as ‘electorates’. Each electorate contained the same number of students but the electorates were themselves arranged hierarchically from richest to poorest, with the actual wealth and income distribution figures for Australia providing the basis for this discrimination.

The students were asked to do a

achieved a great deal and that Justicecountry is now a better country than it was when we started this morning, I am saddened by the number of compromises that we made with our principles. This was only an exercise. What sort of citizens will we be?"

The motivation conundrum

If it is possible for students to be so highly involved, then why do we so often feel that student motivation is such a major issue within our school system? Are our feelings based on real evidence? It seems that the answer to this last question is both yes and no. Michael Barber's work, based on a 1994 survey of 30,000 students in England, confirms our worst fears.

"Almost 60 per cent agree that they 'count the minutes' to the end of the lesson, over 20 per cent believe that work is boring and over 40 per cent believe that lessons are too long."

On the other hand, Peter Senge in *The Fifth Discipline* writes: "We need to rethink our traditional views on motivation. This means setting aside the assumption that people are primarily motivated by rewards, punishments or getting good grades and instead assuming that, in the right atmosphere, young people will contribute and make commitments because they want to learn, to do good work for its own sake and be recognised as people".

If Barber's findings are valid and Senge's assertion is to be taken seriously then the critical question is how do we as educators create the 'right atmosphere' spoken of by Senge? One clue may be found in the words of the American Quaker writer Parker Palmer.

"When we fail to honour the deepest questions of our lives, education remains mired in technical triviality, cultural banality, and worse: it continues to be dragged down by a great sadness. I mean the sadness one feels in too many schools where teachers and students alike spend their days on things unworthy of the human heart – a grief that may mask itself as boredom, sullenness, or anger, but that is, at bottom, a cry for meaning."

What can we learn from the success of the Justicecountry simulation and what are the underlying principles which, when properly understood and applied, can enable us to involve students as active learners at school and agents of conscience in our society?

The worlds we live in

In his book *What Do I Do Monday?*

John Holt argues that authentic transformative learning involves four types of knowing: the knowing that takes place in our inner world; the knowing that comes from our direct experience; the knowing that comes from being told; and the knowing that comes from the world of possibilities and imagination – see Figure 1.

It does seem difficult to envisage that any transformative and genuinely integrated learning could take place unless all four types of knowing are encountered. The often criticised overcrowded curriculum may be the result of educational authorities' attempts to overcome the problem of the limited direct experience of the young students within the school system. My efforts to teach the General Studies class about social inequality could also be viewed from this perspective.

So, if this teaching about the world beyond the students' direct experience is a legitimate part of the learning process, why are students so often passive and passionless about the process? The success of the Justicecountry simulation gives some vital clues to this important dilemma.

Is the classroom experience itself a direct experience?

Many teachers would probably argue that our difficulty with student motivation is a direct result of having to work in the least personal, the least engaging and the least attractive of Holt's four worlds. Teachers may well perceive that the inner world of the student is off-limits, the world of student direct experience is beyond their control and the world of imagination is irrelevant. By default, therefore, our core business as teachers becomes the world of learning about – the one least likely to motivate students.

This brings us to the question: is the classroom experience itself a direct one for the student? To me the answer is obvious. Of course it is a direct

Figure 1: The worlds we live in



experience. So, why are other direct experiences engaging while classroom direct experiences are often unengaging? I believe the simple and stark answer to this question is that we as teachers make them so.

It seems to me that the inner world of the student is not off-limits, the classroom experience, far from being beyond our control, is very much part of the direct experience of both the student and the teacher, and the world of imagination is both relevant and a real driver of learning.

Back to social justice

Many of the students in my General Studies class had no direct experience of social disadvantage. Consequently, my first lesson on the topic could not in itself elicit an emotional response. The turning point occurred when I asked the students to imagine what life might be like in the

[upfront]

various electorates. They were perfectly capable of entering that world, and having entered it, they, at least to some extent, took on the ideas, beliefs and feelings of those people. When they encountered the prejudice of their fellow students they experienced a sense of frustration, anger and powerlessness. So when they were asked what should be done about the situation, their answer incorporated both cognitive and emotional elements. The passionate debates and, in some cases, tearful responses, were testimony to a high level of learner involvement and ownership.

Agents of conscience

The final and most important component in the learning cycle is the application of the learning into the actions of the learner. Unless these impassioned learners become agents of conscience, then all this engaging learning has been much ado about nothing.

It seems that the Red Bend student Prime Minister, Elizabeth went to the heart of the matter when she asked her fellow students: "What sort of citizens will we be?" If the learning experience has been transformative, and has integrated all four ways of knowing, then the question of the students' agency in the world is the essential and possibly the greatest challenge they face. The same question may well present schools with one of their greatest challenges.

Effective schools which demonstrate congruence between their mission statement, their articulated values and their daily practices, are probably best able to offer an authentic and communal answer to Elizabeth's question.

Leo Keegan is an Education Consultant whose main interests are in the areas of pedagogy, values integration and learning styles. He has been involved in classroom teaching, curriculum leadership and teacher professional development for over 30 years. Email: lkeegan@tpg.com.au

1. Barber, M. *The Learning Game*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1996
2. Holt, J. *What Do I Do Monday*, Holt, 1971
3. Palmer, P. *Evoking the Spirit in Public Education*, Education Leadership, 1999 (Volume 56, No 4 pp. 6-11)
4. Senge, P. *The Fifth Discipline*, Random House, London, 1992
5. Smith, I. *Building Strong Motivation*, Hawker Brownlow, Melbourne 2003

[diary]



Creating Environments for Developing Talent

The 10th Biennial Conference of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented.

15 – 17 August 2004

Melbourne Convention Centre, Melbourne

Tel: 0402 056 140
URL: www.vagtc.asn.au/AAEGT/Confin dex.htm

Australian Computer Society National Conference

The main themes of this conference include Business, Technical, Student and Research.

2 – 4 September 2004

Crown Casino Promenade, Melbourne

Tom Rose
Tel: (03) 9690 8000
Email: acsvic@acsvic.com

Challenging Ideas

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) Biennial Conference

21 – 24 September 2004

Gold Coast Convention Centre

Tel: (07) 3854 1611
URL: www.conferences.alia.org.au/alia2004/
Email: alia2004@ozaccom.com.au

One World, a Web of Meanings: Religious Education in a Pluralist Society

Australian Association of Religious Education

This conference is intended for all educators from primary school through to tertiary studies and for all people involved in religious studies in public schools.

27 – 29 September 2004

Crowne Plaza
Surfers Paradise, Queensland

Vincent Riener
Tel: (07) 5535 0111
Email: vrriener@marymount.qld.edu.au
URL: www.aare.org.au/conference2004/Default.htm

Devising Performance

7 - 9 October, 2004

A focus on contemporary approaches to playbuilding, group devised performance and direction/facilitating young performers in year seven-12 drama.

University of Sydney, NSW

Tel: (02) 9351 6383
Fax: (02) 9036 9383
Email: b.arnaud@edfac.usyd.edu.au
URL: <http://faculty.edfac.usyd.edu.au/prof dev/index.html>

Checking the Pulse

A conference for national and international educators to examine the strengths and weaknesses of our current system.

6 – 9 October 2004

Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre

Linda Jacobsen-Willett
Tel: (08) 9305 3338
Fax: (08) 9304 0081
URL: www.checkingthepulse.com

Stand and Deliver: Delivery Strategies for Learning

VETnetwork Australia 4th National Biennial Conference

17 – 19 November 2004

Wrest Point Convention Centre, Hobart

Leishman Associates
Tel: (03) 6234 7844
Fax: (03) 6234 5958
Email: vetnetwork@leishman-associates.com.au