

OPINION

The failure of schools to educate

Tim Hawkes, 8 September 2008

Despite being a headmaster for nearly 20 years, I am just developing a conviction that I have been manifestly unfaithful as an educator because I have been teaching an inadequate curriculum. The fact that this inadequacy in curriculum is probably to be found in most Western schools brings me no comfort at all.

When the philosopher Aristippus of Cyrene was asked, 400 years BC, what students should be taught, he replied: "Those things which they will use when adults."

What, then, are the things our students will use as adults? The only certainties are well known - death and taxes. Do we teach death in our schools? Do we teach financial literacy?

Both my parents died a few years ago. Apart from the grief, I found I had to cope with the ignorance. What sort of funeral service? What is probate? Whom do I have to notify? What are the duties of an executor? My experience is hardly unique. We all have to deal with death, even if it is just our own.

Then there are taxes - a topic I have expanded to include financial literacy. I look at the young today and see far too many victims in the use of credit cards, in understanding the relative benefits of lending schemes, in deciding which telephone plan to use, and in being able to save.

Too many schools have lost sight of those things that will be used by our students when they become adults. The relevance of contemporary school education is compromised by many things, not least by exam systems designed not so much to prepare students for life, as to help them get into tertiary education or improve the resume.

What are the things students will use when they are grown up? Any serious answer is unlikely to omit things such as the ability to:

- * **live in community and forge good relationships;**
- * **communicate well;**
- * **know yourself and what you believe;**
- * **handle intimacy and sex;**
- * **control emotions and impulses;**
- * **manage financial matters;**
- * **do practical things, to clean, cook, make and mend;**

* **be good mannered and know etiquette;**

* **accept responsibility;**

* **be resilient and deal with grief and loss.**

Doubtless more topics should be added, but a list even of this length begins to illustrate a chasm between what a student will use when an adult, and what a student is usually taught at school. There are glorious exceptions, of course, and most schools would be doing some things in some of the above areas, but I believe Western education is generally failing to offer its students relevant material.

It is easy to go rather too far with this thesis and advocate that students become like Byron's *Don Juan*. *He learned the arts of riding, fencing, gunnery.*

And how to scale a fortress - or a nunnery.

Schools should do more than train for a vocation of scaling nunnery walls. Schools must train the heart and mind, and do so through a variety of academic disciplines. However, schools must ensure they remain relevant to their students' future life, and there is rather too much evidence that they are failing in this regard.

I suggest schools should consider teaching the following skills:

1. Community Too often the contemporary child is the isolated doughy blob entertained by a range of expensive electronic equipment which limits their interaction to "e-relationships". These relationships are often transient and disposable, and lack authenticity. Social skills are under-exercised in some families. This can lead to children becoming self-centred and unable to take the needs of others into the orbit of their thinking. In short, they become a social liability in a group larger than one.

What some children need is a compulsory experience of living in community, not just for six hours a day within the choreographed setting of a school, but for 24 hours a day within the chaos of a bickering and restless community. They need to learn to live with people who are different, so that they can operate in a world where annoying people stubbornly remain and there is no "delete" button to remove them.

2. Communicate Students, particularly boys, urgently need help to communicate better. The Neanderthal grunt may work well at the football ground, but not at work or at home. They need to be articulate, and to communicate well in writing. In fairness to schools, this challenge is being met reasonably faithfully.

However, schools must recognise that content governs only about 7 per cent of the impact of speech. The remainder is controlled by the appearance of the speaker (57 per cent) and the sound of the speaker (36 per cent). The science of voice projection, articulation, accent, modulation, pitch and pace needs to be taught, together with the most appropriate posture, grooming and appearance.

All students need to be taught to read body language, to sense mood, to interpret the unspoken feelings of another. They need to improve their ability to send and receive unspoken messages, other than the raised middle finger.

3. Know yourself An essential requirement for all students is that they eventually take "ownership" of what they believe in. They may mimic a political opinion from friends, a faith from parents and a cause from a teacher, but somewhere the student needs to stop the copying and find his or her own voice.

Martin Luther once stood before his critics and said: "Here I stand, I can do no other." Too many young people do not know where they stand or what they believe. An alarming number appear happy to progress through life without a cause, without a creed and without a conviction. Even worse, some do not even know themselves. They have no understanding of their unique gifts or abilities.

4. Intimacy The Western world does a poor job in preparing its students to be intimate. There are always exceptions, but in general students are required to navigate their way through the sexual swamp with minimal direction. Signposts can be vague and contradictory. The parents say this, and the school says that, but the porn site says something completely different. Where adult direction falters, peer direction takes over. The "leader of the pack" can, in strident and boastful voice, suggest the way forward to the forbidden fruit and encourage all to eat thereof. The proper people to educate students about sex are parents.

Some parents are wonderful at giving their children guidelines on sex, but others are delinquent. The latter can be because of the sin of omission. The lexicon of excuses is extensive: "It's not my job - the school will deal with it"; "I'm too busy"; "It's the sort of thing you have to learn yourself"; "They probably know more about it than I do"; "I'm not quite sure what to tell them." There are plenty of excuses to choose from. For other parents, it is the sin of commission. They teach their children an attitude towards sex that is unworthy of them. They model abusive and angry relationships, unfaithful relationships, degrading relationships. The child watches it all, memorises it all and repeats it all.

Schools can also fail their students. Classes will do pencilled drawings of reproductive organs, and become experts on how "tadpoles" swim upstream and how babies grow in the womb. They will be introduced to the horrors of sexually transmitted diseases in that theoretical, antiseptic way. Some of the luckier ones may get to roll a condom onto a banana and giggle their way through a lecture on dating. The mind is fed but not the heart.

The questions students want to ask, they are not allowed to, as it is not in the syllabus. So answers must be sought on the net, in magazines and on the back of toilet doors - they are certainly not in text books. We must do a better job of teaching our children about sex and intimacy. They have little need to hear more about the biology of sex, for this is generally done well in schools. Nor do they need to hear about the morality of sex from adults with dehydrated loins who have no connection with the virility of a teenager.

They want to know what they can, where they can, why they can, when they can, how they can, if they can. They no longer need to know how they measure up in an environment of unconditional love, but how they measure up outside, in the swamp

of life where love, like and lust churn dangerously. It is not just smut and titillation that students want, for they can get these quite easily these days. What they want is something more elusive, something rare, and that is wholesome advice on how to be a man, how to be a woman.

5. Emotional control Prisons are typically full of men, and in particular men who would not be there if they had mastered the art of counting to 10 before acting. Acting impulsively usually means that only the reptilian part of the brain is exercised. Other parts of the brain need to be if students, particularly boys, are to avoid making poor decisions and enlarging our prison population. Fight or flight behaviours may be genetically useful for hunting mammoths or defending a cave from intruders, but are less useful in contemporary suburbia or in seeking acceptance as a mature and measured member of modern society.

6. Finance The level of ignorance in students about financial matters can be frightening. This is revealed in the number of young adults and students who get into financial trouble through an inability to budget, a failure to understand the traps associated with credit cards and incapacity to retire debt. Persistently living beyond their means, relying too much on parental help and making unwise choices on hire-purchase, telephone plans and leasing arrangements are just some of the problems resulting from students not being taught about financial matters. In a society increasingly riven with debt, wealth generation and wealth management need to be taught. The rudiments of saving, and the traps to avoid when borrowing or getting involved in get-rich-quick schemes, need to be shared with our students if we expect them to manage financial affairs appropriately.

7. Practical things Discussions about the absence of life-skills in the young are often laced with horrified tales of fungal growth in bathrooms, kitchen benches piled high with unwashed dishes, ovens blackened by neglect and bedroom carpets disappearing under a rising tide of discarded clothes. Some students have never been taught to cook. If they have, they have probably not been taught to clean up afterwards. A range of home maintenance skills is frequently missing in our students, including how to maintain a lawn mower, change a tap washer, turn off the water if there is a leak, recycle waste, conserve water and reduce the power bill.

8. Manners It is probably all right for a child to eat like a pig, but they must know they are eating like a pig and be able to stop when the situation demands it. Failing to learn many other social behaviours can result in students being disadvantaged. The simple act of sending a thank-you message for a present, shaking hands appropriately, knowing what cutlery to use, addressing a letter correctly, understanding what "formal" means and knowing the art of good conversation are just some of the skills at risk of extinction in the lives of too many of our young.

9. Responsibility Many students live voyeuristic lives. They like to watch. Watching is safe. You bear no responsibility, accept no accountability. "Spectatoritis" is rife. Many of today's teenagers are screenagers. They look, comment and criticise from the comfort of the couch. The child then becomes an adult who finds it difficult to do much other than to watch and excuse themselves from accepting responsibility. Students need to be taught how to take ownership of their own behaviour, how to be leaders, how to make appropriate decisions, and how to serve others well.

10. Resilience Life cannot be expected to provide a constant stream of undiluted fun, praise and success. If students crumple because they do not get an hourly fix of praise, they may not last long. Self-esteem needs to be built up, but never to a stage that ordinary performance is exalted as extraordinary. "Warm fuzzies" are good, but so too are words of correction if they are shared with wisdom and understanding. Students should not depend on a constant diet of praise. Disappointment happens, so do discouragement and distress, and thus some inner courage is required.

It might be as well to remind some that if the world didn't "suck", they would fall off and that some resilience is needed. The gods play with us all and cause us to laugh and cry. Emotional and physical courage is required. As it is said, we are all born naked, wet and hungry, and things then get worse. Fortunately, things also get better.

This is an edited version of a plenary address Dr Hawkes gave to an international boys' schools coalition conference in Canada and a paper to the Federal Government's review of national curriculum. Dr Neil Hawkes is the Principal of the King's School in Sydney.