Fear of education?

In the August 2011 edition of the TCF news, Harley presented some reflections on an article by Rogan Jackson about whether Educational Institutions are responding to the challenges of teaching and learning in the 21st Century. Rogan provided a number of reasons why he believes they are not.

The ageist myth of the digital native

As I read the article I firstly felt quite disturbed by the assumption that technology ability decreases with age. I believe this is a myth in ways that need to be addressed. As I tick the over 50 box these days when filling out forms I become disturbed by the persistence of this myth. I am aware of an article called [The Myth of the Digital Native](#) by Terry Freedman. He believes the myth is not quite so widespread as is often portrayed. Whether the myth is widespread or not, I am consistently presented with evidence to the contrary. Here are some of my pieces of anecdotal evidence:

1. My next-door neighbour is 87 and is frequently using his Mac computer to create PowerPoint presentations, edit movies, perform Internet searches for solutions to his gardening problems and create gift and greeting cards. He at one stage attempted to work on Windows computers to recycle the computers, but gave up because he felt those he was giving them to were not really interested (i.e. not as interested as he is).
2. One of the last teachers to go back to second retirement (i.e. had retired, then came back into teaching only to later go back into retirement) at my present school was training fellow teachers (i.e. under 35s) in how to use Microsoft PhotoStory for teaching and learning. She is really only one of a number where I have observed this kind of scenario.
3. As I write this article, I am being interupted by a long-retired man (age mid 70s? worked as a pastor) who works with the local aboriginal church, and who has been recycling computers (i.e. changing hardware components switching operating systems and installing software) to send to needy pastors in the Philippines. He comes to us when he gets stuck and proclaims that he doesn't "know too much about computers" !
4. I have just spent a number of days with my fellow under 35 teachers, leading them through how to do rather basic things to develop their teaching course in Moodle.
5. The phrase "I haven't got time to do any of that (technology) stuff" is something I only ever hear from fellow staff members who are under 40. One of these who teaches in TAS will even avoid teaching specific technology-based content in the syllabus.
6. I still find myself teaching students how to do things using computers, but I guess that may just be me. But I have frequently come across conversations that go something like this:
   Teacher: Why haven't you handed in your assignment (i.e. on a Moodle web-site)?
   Student: I've forgotten my Moodle password.
   Teacher: Then why didn't you just send it to me by e-mail?
   Student: I don't know how to attach things to an e-mail. Can't I just give it to you on

Facebook?

This story illustrates that some students are only experts in a narrow range of technology skills - their own little Facebook, Google, Flickr world, rather than a range of skills. A set of skills which is often not only narrow but also inflexible unless they see it to be important. That is, students learn skills if they see it to be important - irrespective of whether it involves technology or not. The students who do show expertise in a range of technology skills are often those who see that these skills are useful for what they want to do. (I do also keep hearing stories from teachers who have these later types of students).

So, I would suggest that age is definitely not the issue when it comes to responding to the challenges of teaching and learning in the 21st Century. It is worth reminding ourselves of the equality of all ages considering we live in a society that seems to place a greater worth on children than on the elderly. I find no such ageism in the Bible. All are precious to God irrespective of age. So, rather than age, I think there is instead a far more important issue which is at the heart of education. Some seem to adapt to the skills that are prominent in the 21st Century, while others don't and then dig their heels in and refuse to change.

What is education?

The far more important issue is - "What is education?" This reminds me of an article which has become popular among some educators on the Internet - "What Does It Mean to Be Well-Educated?", by Alfie Kohn. Although it was written in 2003, he considers this question with a good grasp of the implications of technology to education. His concluding statement is "**To be well-educated, then, is to have the desire as well as the means to make sure that learning never ends.**"

I understand that the term "life-long learners" is far more common in Queensland than here in NSW. However I think it is far more sensible than thinking that being near retirement age is an excuse to ignore the implications of technology for society and education. Instead, as educators we would seek to learn - yes even to learn from the students - irrespective of our age. This will set the example for our students in terms of education being about life-long learners, as well as showing a level of respect for the students we are teaching, that they too have skills to be shared.

However the term "life-long learners" does not fully answer the question by itself. It does not tell us which skills to learn. Nor does it tell us how students can perceive such skills as being relevant (just because it uses computers does not mean they will see it as relevant). It is questions like these which hopefully our syllabus writers are considering, yet they are still relevant when we decide how a particular topic or part of the syllabus will be covered. What will we be asking our students to do during our lessons, and for our assignments etc.?

Do job prospects drive education?

Another quote from the Rogan Jackson article is that "Students seem to be massively goal-

driven at school in a way my generation was not. They see schooling as a ticket to and major determinant of their future." I have heard of teachers who teach students like this. However it does not describe most of my students nor the majority of students at my school. Instead I more commonly have students who are major pragmatists - "I need to stay at school till I am 17, and I will work out what happens then. What do I need to do to satisfy that?". As the careers advisor and I kick back the depression that comes with teaching students who have this attitude, I scratch around, ask a few questions, and I have a suggestion of the error that is behind the two extremes. The error is the notion that school exists to get you a job.

For the driven student, they (or a parent) have worked out their goal, and will pragmatically see that doing something they see as meaningless and irrelevant will get them their goal. Whether or not technology will be involved will therefore become irrelevant, as they will use whatever skills are necessary to reach that goal. Typically however if the student reflects back, they will think that what was learned at school is mostly not being used in their goal career (if they actually achieve it). So I wonder whether the student is really educated, or whether they instead have been squeezed into a role. Will they really be life-long learners able to adapt if they find that their dream career becomes redundant. More importantly, will they be able to cope when at the same time relationship pressures occur, at the same time as a financial collapse, environmental concerns and the car wont start?

On the other hand, the student at the other extreme has already worked out that school is irrelevant, as they have no aspirations of having a job, let alone a career. After all, the parent had gotten by quite fine on social security, so did their grand parents (and probably their great grand parents if they were able to talk with them). So if school exists to get you a job, then even the notion of school is irrelevant, let alone the subject matter it is dealing with. I find these students will even fill out school forms saying they have career aspirations, but when I ask them about it, I find an unconscious deception - they only said that because they know that those are the type of answers that Centrelink expect on their forms, so they write it on the school forms too.

Education for life

So I suggest the error is the notion that school is presented as existing to get the student a job. Instead we need to be able to help students see that school is to help them for life. This extends the notion of Kohn of having the desire and skills so that learning never ends, to instead say that it is not only to have the skills to keep learning, but to cope with life as it is presented.

As a science teacher, I have used a video by UK teacher Alom Shaha to help students see that science is studied not simply to help them get a job, but because they are human. The video is on YouTube and Vimeo, and has a web-site. I hope there are similar resources for other subject areas. After seeing the movie, students are extremely quick to quote the parts of the movie that relate to jobs, but very slow to pick-up the other reasons for studying science. The assumptions of our society run very deep.

As a christian, the reason I would do anything is to glorify God, so there are a whole new set of reasons that go with that for each subject area. For Science the means that we are investigating God's world as it is his wonderful world, and each new amazing aspect is a reason to praise Him. Furthermore, this perspective helps to equip us for the tragedies in life - to have a correct perspective on such tragedies, and to be equipped to rightly respond (or cope) with them. Unfortunately teaching in a secular system means that it is rare that I get to share this.

One area of agreement with the secularist is the importance of relationships for life. So in saying that education is for life, we can say that we are being educated so we can relate to the rest of society. (As a christian we would also want to relate to God, but as I have already said, that is invalidated by the assumptions of our secular society). This is why communication skills are so dominant in each syllabus. So whatever tools our society are using to communicate are relevant skills to be trained. This is why Rogan Jacobson's article could suggest that 21st Century skills are so important. There are a range of communication strategies out there. Facebook may be a connection point that students are already skilled in (to excess?). It is a communication medium, and so needs to be seen as part of society's communication medium. With this comes the need to be trained to use it appropriately and safely. Similarly students should have the skills in other means of modern communication - production of Multi-media to communicate and persuade is clearly another example of these 21st Century skills appropriate to communicate in the 21st Century. So the whole realm of Cybersafety and the resources provided by the Cybersmart web-site become an important aspect of a 21st Century education. How this is best done is an issue that will remain relevant for teachers and hopefully will be a perspective of curriculum and syllabus writers. Similarly the teachers' desire and skills of being a life-long learners will remain a high priority in being examples and relating well to students.

For the Christian, the ethical issues involved in the use of technology is just another twist of the fallen nature written about in passages such as Romans 1:28-32. Not necessarily new sins, just the same sins using different tools.

Similarly, wise use of 21st Century skills are needed for a correct understanding of the world. So the skills of investigating using these technologies go with training students to evaluate the information found (e.g. on the Internet). The end result should be the ability to make judgements about truth. This is where I become passionate as both a Christian and a Science teacher - students need the skills to evaluate evidence and sources of information to draw valid conclusions (science); for me the ultimate is for the student to know the truth of the gospel (but again the system of our secular society prohibits me placing these together for the student). My prayer would be that students gain the skills to know this ultimate truth.

Implications

So I am trying to work out how to make each lesson an illustration of life-long learning at work. I would like to see students convinced that they are at school to help prepare them for life. Technology would be a component of this, as it has become so much a part of life that needs to be expanded for students.

I had participated in the Yammer site for the Department of Education. I have tried to participate in Maang too, though it is quite unfriendly in comparison. It would be nice if TCF members could encourage one another in on-line discussions too. My original vision for the TCF web-site was as a place for members to share thoughts in forums and wikis so that encouragement occurs. For technical reasons I have been unable to follow through on this vision so far.

Encouragement does not occur in isolation, and the Internet has become a place where isolation can be reduced. Distance and the expense of travel reduces the frequency of real meetings. I am not really a Facebook fan, but I do see that it is a simple way to overcome such problems of isolation, while also remaining familiar with what our (high school) students are living. I even suggest that any fears of new ways of doing things may be able to be worked

through with the help of on-line discussions.

You will find a link to the Teachers Chrstian Fellowship Facebook page on the [TCFof NSW webpage](#).

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