

# 1. IS VALUES EDUCATION JUST THE LATEST FAD?

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Thank you for inviting me to share some thoughts on the teaching of values. It's certainly flavour of the month, not only in educational circles, but also in the political arena. Schools, of course, are fair game when it comes to complaining about anything that's not going right in society. Literacy and numeracy, driver education, graffiti, drop in our exports – you name it – it's obvious to everyone that the school's to blame.

So is current debate about values education another fad? Will the present high level of funding dry up, or will it be diverted to some other *cause célèbre* such as the teaching of History, or English, or Science? I hope not. I *suspect* not, because this particular topic has been running now for over 15 years. Why so?

## WHY THE CURRENT INTEREST?

I'm ancient enough to remember what it was like growing up in the years after the Second World War. The general community was staidly mono-cultural, accepting the values of Christendom – even if they didn't live by them. Mind you, not all the values of Christendom were Christian. We've never been a Christian country, only one strongly influenced by core Christian values.

I suppose that's what made people think that state schools could be value-neutral. The values of Christendom were being taken for granted, like the air we breathe. When I became a university lecturer in the mid-'sixties, I chose to focus my research on the application of ethics and value theory in education. I might as well have chosen underwater flower arrangement, for all the interest people had in what I was working on. State schools were expected to be value-neutral and just teach facts and skills. And church schools felt they knew what the core values were, and how to teach them, so they didn't need anyone suggesting they ought to think again about the teaching of values.

But even then, a number of factors were breaking down the general consensus in Australian society. In my university studies, Scientific Positivism was banishing religion to the cultural graveyard; Western societies in the 'sixties were experiencing a youth revolution which was challenging adult authority; the contraceptive pill was tempting many people to relax their sexual standards, and migration was bringing to our shores many people who held different world-views from ours. Some worrying outcomes of all this have been steep increases in the number of broken marriages, dysfunctional families, and ethnic disagreements.

## PACE QUICKENING IN THE 'NINETIES

It took a while for the community to admit it had problems, but then in the 'nineties, there was an increasing number of public enquiries into values education. Let me name some of the most notable – it's an incomplete list, but it makes the point.

In 1991, for example, the Director-General of Education in NSW, an Evangelical Christian named Dr Fenton Sharpe, issued a very robust revision of an official Education Department statement called *The Values We Teach*. Three years later a Queensland Report on Education included a values charter for State schools. In 1995, I was involved with others in a West Australian project in the non-state sector which developed an *Agreed Minimum Values Framework*. Shortly after, the Minister for Education set up the West Australian Curriculum Council,

which produced a Curriculum Framework for all subjects including, for the first time, a Values Framework heavily indebted our earlier production.

### **Enter the Commonwealth**

In the meantime, the Commonwealth Government was stirring. After the publication of the national Dawkins curriculum, which had been woefully lacking in attention to values outcomes, a different government department began to push a different line. In 1994, the Prime Minister's Department published a report on *Civics and Citizenship* which pushed for direct values education in these areas. Before the Government could act on this report, however, the Liberal Party won the next election and it went on hold. But for once an incoming Government didn't undo a previous policy. Instead, as follow-up to the Citizenship Report, it launched the *Discovering Democracy* project. This ran from 1996, and there are some very useful resources on its website.

Then, in 2002, the Education Minister of the time, Brendan Nelson, funded a Values Education Study, which involved 69 schools, chosen across state and sectoral boundaries. Some good things happened in several of these schools, and Nelson decided to bid in cabinet for more money. The 2004 Federal Budget set aside a sum of \$29.7 million for a 4-year Values Education Program, including the following elements:

- A poster spelling out "9 Core Values" and a booklet describing the National Framework in detail.
- School Forums - Each Australian school is entitled to make a one-off bid for \$1000 to conduct a school and community forum.
- The Good Practice Schools Project – In the first round, there were grants to 26 clusters involving 132 schools (32 non-state, mainly Catholic - the rest, state schools)
- University Associate Network - one academic advisor was assigned to each cluster.
- National Education Forums were to be conducted annually where there would be reports from the field on what was happening – this year's forum was held last May.
- Curriculum and Community Resources pitched at Primary, Secondary, and Community levels.
- A national website on which all publications are available.

### **What's currently happening?**

So what's currently happening, if anything? It's a natural question to ask, because fads can often be a lot of sound and fury signifying nothing. I for one was apprehensive, that when all this grant money was made available, the end result might be a lot of window dressing and travel to talk-fests, without anything much changing on the ground.

But in last May's Forum, reports came in from the various parts of the federal program, particularly the school clusters in the Good Practice Schools Project. And I found myself feeling excited about the number of schools and teachers that were really trying to make a difference. Many experiments were being tried, and many keen people were involved. Since then, a second round of Commonwealth grants has been set in motion.

The school forum program hadn't gone very far at that stage, but that was because promised resources had been slow in coming, and in fact these only went onto the website after the conference. Meanwhile, several states had begun to foreground values education even before the Commonwealth program began. In NSW, for instance, John Gore has been leading the charge, and you probably know better than I what is being achieved. So I won't dwell on the plus side any more. I think it equally important, however, to identify some shortcomings that are evident in current approaches.

## SOME SHORTCOMINGS IN PRESENT EFFORTS

### 1. Confused Discourse

The first shortcoming, as I see it, is that we're not used to talking technically about beliefs and values. These are words with a good feel. They add colour to many speech nights and school brochures. But they tend to conceal some of the difficulties which in practice tempt teachers to put them in the too hard basket. After all, talking about "facts" and "skills" and "cognitive outcomes" sounds satisfactorily hard-nosed and translatable into strategies of teaching and assessment. But beliefs and values? Are they the same thing? Can they be measured? Indeed, ought they to be measured?

As a first step in developing ethical discourse I often begin by offering a clarification of the relation between these two terms. The teacher presents an idea which Ernie encounters for the first time. He can reproduce what he heard in a written test, but that's not necessarily the same thing as understanding it. So teachers know that relying on rote learning won't get us far. We must teach, and test, for understanding. But now here's another complication. Will that be enough to guarantee that Ernie will *believe* what we tell him?

Belief is a further step, obliging Ernie to decide whether the idea fits in with his general view of the world. He may of course believe that everything the teacher says is infallibly true. But no good teacher could be content to leave it there. We must help Ernie to review the evidence for and against that idea being true, requiring him to think for himself. But now, supposing Ernie comes to believe that the idea in question is true, can we be confident that he will value it, to the extent of thinking it important enough to influence his choices in life? That seems to require something more.

I can say that I have grounds for believing that the Sydney Swans are not gentle birds but actually a group of AFL footballers, even if they don't seem to fly very high. But I also have to say, though with some diffidence in present company, that I don't attach much value to that piece of information. In fairness, the Fremantle Dockers don't quicken my pulse much either. By contrast, I also believe that many people in Third World countries experience appalling poverty, and this prompts me to channel some of my personal resources to them through what I believe to be a faithful and well-managed aid agency. My belief in this case has provoked me to act in accordance with the value I place on the worth of other human beings.

And for teachers, there's the rub. Telling students something, and even implanting a belief, don't guarantee that our students will embrace values that we consider worthy. For that we need a richer account of how we teach values, and a recognition of the limitations of schooling at this point. This takes us on to the second shortcoming.

### 2. Simplistic Psychology

It's been heartening to see the number of cluster school reports which have taken into account the often hidden curriculum of schooling. Some mention the importance of teachers as models, recognising that teachers inevitably reflect their personal values in their attitudes to the students both as learners and as persons. That's an important point, often honoured in the breach by teachers who see themselves merely as instructors, naïvely imagining that the students are unaware of their core values.

The same goes for school principals, of course, particularly in relation to the way they run their school and behave towards their staff and students. I recall the principal who announced to his staff, "This term all classes will devote six periods to teaching the concept of democracy. I want your programs on my desk by Friday. That will be all!" The situation is not much better in schools that teach values like "honesty" and "resilience" in two weeks blocs and expect lasting attachment to occur.

There are also disturbing blind-spots in the approaches of those favouring cognitive psychology and those favouring behaviourist approaches. The cognitivists are likely to heed our earlier warning that transmission of values by telling isn't enough. They rightly emphasise that we must encourage value analysis and critical thinking as well. But they don't necessarily recognise the gap between believing and valuing. Behaviourists, on the other hand, may put their trust in reinforcing desirable behaviours and punishing bad behaviours, unaware that the conformity they are able to secure in the classroom may not extend beyond it.

Human beings are choosing beings, however young, with an inner core of selfhood which either rises up in rebellion or fakes consent until free from the authority figures which are controlling them. This ought also to warn us against attributing too much power to the schooling model to achieve all we hope for in the area of values education.

### **3. The Limitations of Reliance on Lists**

The second issue concerns the limitations of relying on mere lists of values, taught seriatim. Many lists of recommended core values are being touted. They give the impression that values are a bit like walnuts lying on the ground. It's a game of mix and match. Pick the ones you like: "I'll have honesty, but I think I'll let you have chastity ...", and so on. Various curriculum packages can now be located on the Net.

One package is called "Living Values Education." It lists 12 core values. Another, called "The Virtues Project" nominates 52. Catholic theology spells out the traditional 7: 4 natural virtues, 3 theological. A Jewish rabbi wrote to me recently arguing for what are termed the Noahide Laws – ie. seven commandments which the Bible says God gave Noah. Many Jewish writers say these constitute a universal ethic binding on all human beings. All this is rather confusing for curriculum developers and busy teachers.

All the same, I'd like to put in a good word for the Commonwealth attempt to identify 9 core values. I think the list's a bit muddled, but at least it's an attempt to tie them in with Australia's commitment to democracy. That's a step on the way to acknowledging that values need justification. Good walnuts don't come from nowhere; they grow on trees.

People need to feel that good reasons lie behind the values they live by. They need to connect with the deeper beliefs people have about why they're here and what gives their lives significance. That's the problem of justification. At the same time, if people feel certain values are right for them, then that also provides the motivation to live by them. It all depends on your world view. That brings me to the fourth shortcoming.

### **4. The Neglect of World-view Studies**

If we're going to teach values properly, somewhere along the line we need to study the way world-views cause people to act the way they do. Just learning about a number of values that some people regard as core values will fall to the ground. It may even mislead students because, in the end, no recommended package is world-view neutral. I mentioned, for example, that Catholic and Jewish world-views each present core values in a different way because of their total views of the world. Walnuts grow on trees. What about the other lists I mentioned?

Take "Living Values Education" – the package that lists 12 core values. Where has it come from? The answer is a Hindu group called Brahma Kumaris. The fact that their package has been promoted by UNESCO in over 70 countries shouldn't blind us to the influence of Hindu philosophy on the selection and description of these values. Or take "The Virtues Project", which listed 52 values. Where has that come from? It took rather more detective work on the Net to track down the fact that it originates from a Ba'hai source. Once you know that, you can detect a slant in the way the values are unpacked and presented.

Now both these packages are well-constructed. Most of their resources can be put to good use, because many of the values they recommend are common also to the cultural heritage of

Australia. But older students particularly would need to be made aware of their origins, and taught about how to evaluate world-views – not just the one they know most about already, but others which are having a big effect in our society. I might say that I find it rather ironical that these packages should be gaining such ready acceptance in schools, while at the same time study of the Christian world-view and the values it has contributed to public life and culture in Australia is being increasingly contested.

It's worth mentioning in this connection that a conference was recently held in Canberra challenging the neglect, in the teaching of Australian history, of the substantial influence of Christian beliefs and values. Some of the excellent papers presented there by noted academics and politicians are now available on the website of the Australia's Christian Heritage National Forum - that's <<http://australiaschristianheritageforum.org.au/resources>>

## ESSENTIAL PARTNERSHIPS

The last set of issues I want to raise concerns the need for effective partnerships in the total project of values education. It's common to hear people saying piously that in this matter the school needs to co-operate with the home, and vice versa. But if we're going to get beyond comforting platitudes, more must be said about this aspect.

I've commented in passing a few times already on the fact that the school is limited in what it

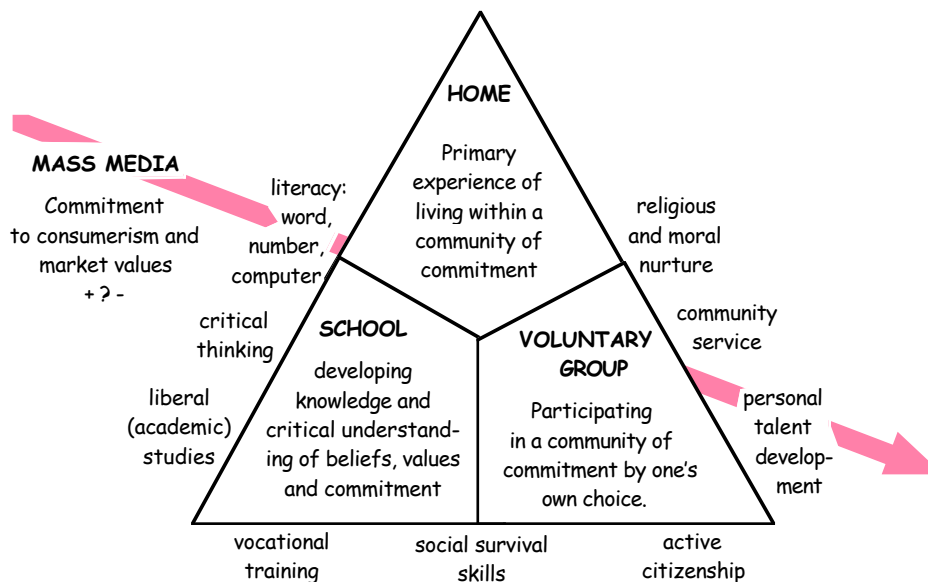


Diagram: Agents in Values Education

can do. That runs counter to the attitude of some teachers who consider that parents are amateurs whose influence on their children must be countered in the interests of a good education. This professional snobbery is not exclusive to teachers. And it receives some backing from statistics which show alarming increases in the number of dysfunctional families.

But there are also other agencies that are influencing the young, and need to be taken into account. The diagram above indicates particular contributions that are made respectively by the home, the school and voluntary groups. In principle, these may be regarded as benevolent influences, whereas the influence of the mass media is much more ambivalent, especially when we factor in the dominance of the profit motive, which encourages programmers to exploit human frailties in the interests of keeping their attention and encouraging them to consume

products. At the least, education in media analysis and resistance is an essential part of values education.

I haven't time to explore other details in this diagram, but one thing it is meant to illustrate is that the home cannot be disregarded, and the school that declines to cultivate this partnership will find its efforts in values education thwarted by the generally stronger effect of home values. This has implications for parent education, particularly in a time when parenting skills are no longer passed on in many dysfunctional households. The same is true of the school's partnership with worthy voluntary groups, and I'd like to fill that aspect out a little more just before I close.

### **Partnership with voluntary agencies**

I often invite people to consider a continuum extending from institutions characterised by controls and compulsion, to those characterised by freedom of choice and action. Then I invite them to nominate an institution nearest to the compulsory end. What would you nominate?

Surely, a prison. But ever since Erving Goffman spelled out the defining features of "asylums" or psychiatric hospitals in the 1960s<sup>1</sup>, we've become more aware how often the "cells and bells" pattern of control emerges in other institutions – as, for example, the boarding school, and to a lesser degree, the day school. I was reminded how often we fall back on control techniques when they're actually counter-productive in terms of the outcomes we hope for, when I looked into the way long summer camps for teenagers are set up in the U.S.A.. Some constraints are necessary in such a residential environment as a camp, and teachers are good at suggesting and applying them. But the best camp leaders are those who try to minimise the role boundaries of leadership and build personal bonds through free association.

This is even truer of the voluntary group where attendance is entirely at the discretion of the young person. I'll spell its features out more in a moment. The ultimate position on the continuum, going in this direction, is the personal friendship, where roles have been superseded by relationships, and influence replaces control as the lever in the adoption of values.

But where would you locate the home on this continuum? Homes differ greatly, and clearly there must be elements of compulsion in the earlier years, but good parents strive over time to increase the areas of free association available to the child, and in the best families hope for personal friendship.

What about churches? They operate, after all, in the voluntary sector of our kind of society. There are some religious groups which rely heavily on psychological pressure to secure conformity and loyalty in the young (and older!), but in their all-age activities there will be some mimicking of the gradual release of control which characterises good homes. And, of course, churches have been well aware in recent centuries of the compatibility of voluntary youth groups with the objectives they are trying to reach.

Finally, I return to my earlier comments about the limitations of schooling in respect of values education. Voluntary groups and the school need each other, particularly in dealing with the education of adolescents. Each has a role, and each, hopefully, appreciates the value of cultivating a personal relationship. By contract, the teacher is necessarily more directly obliged to play a role in controlling the class, presenting a curriculum, and assessing the outcomes of learning. The youth leader, on the other hand – less endowed than the teacher with powers of compulsion – is more able to present as a friendly person in free association with whoever chooses to associate with his or her group.

The strengths of schooling include being able to reach the entire population of children and youth, offering them access to reliable public information, equipping them with the skills

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<sup>1</sup> Erving Goffman, *Asylums*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1961.

needed to evaluate different beliefs and values, and the social competencies needed to operate wisely and well in pluralistic democracy. The down-side is that compulsory attendance, necessary limitations on free movement, and compulsory curriculum and assessment, all tend to constrain students and generate resistance in them to the inculcation of values.

On the other side of the ledger, the down-side of leadership in a voluntary group is that only those who want to come are brought under the group's influence, there are risks that groups representing a particular world-view may give biased information, and create a ghetto mentality. As to what you can do if things are getting out of control, your final recourse is to exclude the young person from the group, which of course defeats your purpose in setting the group up.

On the other hand, voluntary groups affirm the choosing person. They gain dignity from being free to inspect what you have to offer, to enter freely into closer association with the group and with adult friends, and to "try on" the values you are commending to them by word, action, and personal example.

Good schools will not look down on community groups or regard their programs as being in competition with the school's activities. They will commend reputable community groups to their students as a way of extending their own curriculum in liberal studies, sport, religious and cultural pursuits, and community service. Even during school time itself, they will be hospitable to voluntary student activities on the premises, and elective subjects, as opposed to investing all the hours available in compulsory curriculum.

In particular, we may reasonably hope that when it sometimes seems impossible to negotiate with dysfunctional parents and carers, the symbiosis between school and voluntary groups may yet rehabilitate damaged youngsters, and inspire in all students a commitment to serving others. That will be the point at which to assess how much or little we've achieved in values education.