

Tasmania's unique paradigm

I have worked by invitation in over three hundred secondary schools across Australia, usually involving curriculum provision and timetabling. (I've attached a short CV as appendix). There is no doubt in my mind that there is a mindset in Tasmania that is unique and that hinders effective education in the senior secondary years.

The unique managerial mindset in Tasmanian educational administration can be traced back to the mid 20th century. Immediately following WW2, secondary education ceased to be for a minority and became the norm. Tasmania met the challenge by introducing area schools. This involved bussing students in to central places – to centres of curriculum provision. Later, in the 1960s, these typically became district high schools.

The main solution in most other states was quite different. Distances there were too great for bussing. The challenge for government schools led first to 'schools of the air' and later to schools of distance education either allowing young people to stay at home on their property or attend local schools where the programs were supplemented by the distance facility so the students could stay in the town. (I have worked in a number of Queensland and NSW communities where families have said that they would move from the town once their children finished primary school if the local school no longer offered years 11 and 12. In 2007, the Queensland Studies Authority commissioned me to write a report on ways of allowing smaller schools to offer a full program of 11 and 12 courses – Google QSA and Middleton – it's on line).

So if we analyse the consequences of this history, we see that **Tasmania was about moving kids to centres of educational provision. Elsewhere it was about moving the curriculum to the kids.**

In Tasmania, the curriculum became a place!

Let me illustrate what I mean. When I was at Huonville High School as Deputy Principal in 1979, the community there was quite upset about the kids having to travel to Hobart every day. Central administrators Rex Wilson and Trevor Leo came down and spoke to a large number of parents. Their message went something like

“At Hobart Matric, we can offer 176 courses for students to choose. How could you possibly offer that choice here? Your students would be disadvantaged.”

I had done my homework and replied

“But the students who went to Hobart Matric from here last year only chose a total of 12 subjects. We could easily staff and/or provide for those offerings here!” Needless to say, I wasn't popular!

In most other Australian regions, the solution was to bring the curriculum to the schools, however small. And this was before the Internet! The logic is much stronger now.

It's not just a thing of the past. The mindset still exists. It occurs centrally where administrators and economic 'number crunchers' talk about viability. For them, this means that there are enough students wanting to study a subject to form a 'class'. The result is that

students can only study a subject if there are a dozen or so others in their age group in their school who want to study the subject too. There is lip service paid to distance learning and the use of distance technology; but it's always seen as a last resort, a second best, often rejected by parent communities!

Administrators and teachers in schools reflect this paradigm. They don't have the modelling to see that the unit of learning is appropriately a single student, and to act accordingly. E-learning needs to become part of mainstream thinking. I have worked in many schools in Queensland, NSW and South Australia where there are groups of one, two or three students studying a subject in year 11 or 12, and doing very well relative to their city based peers. I recall a school in Roma (St John's) that in 2001 was offering five languages using a learning centre approach and a teacher who was trained in just one foreign language.

It isn't just teachers and administrators who need to become aware of the potential of a different paradigm. So too do parent communities – people who attended schools where the 'curriculum is a place' mindset dominated.

There is a danger in Tasmania that the model of distance learning they will adopt will be very expensive because they will use professional specialist teachers to put the programs on line (or to engage in interactive programs), and they will want less specialised teachers in the schools to interpret and manage the 'teaching' in the classroom, using the IT as a kind of teachers' aid, much like educational television was used in the 1960s. We need to be aware that young people, even of primary school age, are adept at using information technologies, often much more effectively than their parents and teachers. The role of the teacher in the local site remains incredibly important, not merely as a transmitter of knowledge, but as an expert in the processes involved in learning, and as a role model and inspiration for students.

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