

The Isaac Armitage Lecture 2010

Shore School

Response to Rev Dr Bruce Winter by Mrs Judith Poole, Headmistress Abbotsleigh

Thank you for the introduction and I feel honoured to respond to Dr Winter's address.

I am sure there is not a single educator in this room that didn't feel at least a little thankful that the selection criterion for a teaching position has changed since those first century days in Greece. I am not sure which made me shuffle in my seat more; the physically fit 'bodily presence' expectation or the thought of sage on the stage 'presence' where one is challenged to give an articulate and compelling presentation on a topic nominated by the audience.

Learning for earning a living – a new concept of the time. Over 2000 years later we understand all too clearly societal pressure to define success as earning a substantial living and moving into the mindset of 'everything is permitted for me'. Hey, you deserve it, you're number one. Add a touch of media sexualisation, parental absence and conditioning for instant gratification and presto : 'happiness abounds'.

Yes, in many ways the students that enter our schools are pre-programmed by a plethora of unfiltered input from our secular community. Our challenge as Christian schools is to offer an alternative pathway; not just any alternative but one that is anchored in our faith in Jesus Christ. As Christian educators we bring a perspective and a worldview which will guide students in grappling with the big questions in life.

While we traditionally teach about the Bible, run chapels and role model Christian behaviour, our efforts may fall short in an attempt to reprogram students without engaging the students with experiential learning activities that make a difference. I agree with Dr Winter that service is one way to shift

the focus from 'me' to 'others', but the challenge that confronts us as educators, is how best to set up a meaningful learning experience through service.

Some schools engage in community service projects. Often these are prepared opportunities for students to spend time doing tasks that benefit the community such as bush regeneration weeding and planting, preparing meals for the homeless, packing boxes for Anglicare, entertaining at an aged care facility and so on. While each of these activities are worthwhile and no doubt give students a sense of doing something for others, the activity itself will have limited long term value without a deeper approach to the learning exercise.

One could strengthen the impact of the experience by repeating the exercise several times or providing a framework to reflect on the experience. The impact of service work has been studied extensively in America and some limited research has taken place in Australia. It is through exploring this research that I suggest an alternative approach to the traditional community service model; one which shifts the focus from service only to a concept of service-learning with an equal emphasis between service and learning. As educators we know rich learning experiences need to engage the learner's emotional side as well as the intellectual side or more simply said 'the heart as well as the mind'. Service-learning is a powerful and effective pedagogical approach that is transforming the lives of otherwise disengaged young people.

Through guidance by researcher Professor Andrew Furco from the University of California in Berkley, Abbotsleigh began exploring this multi-faceted teaching and learning experience called service-learning about 8 years ago. This journey has led us not only to look carefully at our teaching pedagogy but also at the Christian values we aim to impart to our students. Service-learning is about linking specific learning outcomes with genuine opportunities for service in the community. In the process, students become active partners in identifying community need and planning service activities. The projects are authentic and the implementation builds understanding. Students evaluate

their project and reflect on the impact of the activities on themselves and others. Youth ownership is one of the key elements of our program.

Partnering with the community is essential in building an understanding of the needs of others. By actively engaging with the community the students build relationships that help them grow in their capacity to appreciate diversity. The community partners may be other schools, community social service groups, aid organisations, hospitals or local businesses. Learning takes place in the collaboration of ideas helping to bridge the cultural, generational, intellectual or physical differences.

The service-learning activities are not supplementing our curriculum but rather playing an integral part in our teaching and learning. The experiential nature of the activity helps the learners make connections, often over several subject areas, deepening their understanding of the material. By engaging in an activity that matters to the community students begin to recognise that they can make a difference. This sense of worth empowers young people, giving them a reason to learn.

The projects are real and the impact can be substantial for those involved. Coupled with the concept of youth ownership is the important role of the teacher or mentor of the students. Teachers help to tie the projects to specific curriculum outcomes and act as a role models and participants in the learning process. Teachers encourage critical and creative thinking in problem solving solutions with the students and community partners. Reflection activities can help to assess students' understanding, allow them a chance to share their feelings, internalise new concepts and evaluate the impact of the activities. Mentors play a critical role in guiding students in reflection and linking their experience to our Christian values.

Christ called us to 'Feed the hungry, nurture the sick, cloth the naked and be a voice for the oppressed.' Because of his ultimate sacrifice our priorities shift – the fruits of the secular world are replaced with hope of eternal redemption. It is hope that this generation and future generations need.

As James writes in Chapter 2; 'faith by itself, if not accompanied by action is dead.'

In our Christian schools, we have a reason for service that goes beyond the humanitarian approach. In our efforts to develop the horizontal relationships with other humans on the earth to work together for the good of all we anchor our motivation in our vertical relationship with God. For many students, service-learning starts from the horizontal or earthly relationships which help students grow in compassion and experience the joy of giving. This experience, if done well, can be so great that a window is opened, a heart is softened and an avenue for a vertical relationship with God is paved.

Dr Winter, you comment that schools are the last train stop before students get on board for the journey of life. On this point I disagree, students of any age are already on that journey of life and it is our responsibility to ensure that it is focussed on learning for living in all subjects, at all times. As we send out graduates of the 21st century we pray that they will have the strength of character to resist pressures of the secular world in their life-long learning pursuits and become Godly role models and mentors for the future generations.

Dr Winter, you asked 'Am I being overly simplistic or overly optimistic in suggesting that laying the foundation for learning for living is the most important function in Christian schools?' Without a doubt, those of us who work passionately in Christian schools would respond with a resounding 'no', it is the only way.