EXPANDING THE UNIVERSE OF EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

We understand education to mean the encouragement as well as the delivery of the means to help people to inform themselves of the significance of the world beyond their normal communities and outside the bounds of their families and personal experience.

We understand rural to mean any environment which can result in forms of isolation, caused by economic, geographic, physical or social factors, which inhibit people from realising their full personal enjoyment and their potential as contributing members of the Australian society.

The three major tasks in expanding the universe of education for rural people in Australia therefore involve:

> educating rural people to their needs in a rapidly changing economic, political and social environment;

> educating rural people on the irreversible and unavoidable changes which will transmogrify the demography and economy of Australia within their lifetimes;

> educating rural people on the range of facilities, support services and technologies which they can use to enhance their cultural, economic, personal and social well being.

The Conference theme: "Lifelong learning in rural areas: between a rock and a hard place" can be translated to create a working strategy:

> avoid all rocks and hard places by steering clearly between them with personal education delivered through 'high tech gear'.

Most of the technical equipment and systems which can reduce the tyranny of distance and isolation are readily available. The problem is the cost, in personal ability, comprehension, training and money. Since many of the poorest and most needy citizens of Australia live in rural areas, the delivery of the equipment to steer between the rock and the hard place, should be given a very high priority rating on SPERA's agenda for the 21st century.

The means to achieve the delivery of the necessary 'high tech gear' will involve SPERA, with the potential sponsorship of hard and soft core manufacturers and distributors, expending the annual conference to include an exhibition, market and window of opportunities for rural educators in the Southwest Pacific Rim.

When all else is working properly, personal support and educational reinforcement are the vital links between rural individual needs and the achievement of SPERA's aspirations for the enhancement of the educational opportunities for every rural Australian.

DEFINITIONS FOR 'EDUCATION'

The simplest way to expand the universe of education is to broaden its definitions. Three traditional attitudes to education should be demolished to clear the way to expand the universe of education for rural Australians:

1) universal, compulsory class room education based on general curriculum, where the relevance is not necessarily clear. Major future issues will be determined on the basis of who should make the decisions, in response to whose needs, and for what human and social conditions (do many people remember "Wheat of the World" projects?);

2) the significance, for and against SPERA's aims, of the inhibiting traditions of ivory towers and trade schools, of fundamental and applied studies, and the simplistic notions represented by work for 'brain or brawn';

3) notions of what is and what is not 'educational', in respect of subject matter and personal prerequisites for study. SPERA should assist rural educational institutions in recognising the significance of the popular demands for personal development and lifestyle courses, from assertiveness training to farm managing, and from job seeking skills (including the inspiring "finance for non finance management") to enhancing the personal enjoyment in every possible leisure opportunity.

Education must be encouraging, for people may not know how readily they can enhance their lives through study. Education is about teaching people how to learn and how to use the hardware and software to achieve their personal goals. Once they're on to the good thing, sticking to it is 90% of success. Encouragement therefore must involve external reinforcement, it becomes a critical element in personal achievement.

User friendly education offered in jargon free language must be complemented with reading lists that include books which are still in print and available through local bookshops and libraries. It will involve much more effort than is shown, for example, in the copious reading lists put out by university academics which include many unavailable, out of print and unobtainable texts, and very expensive limited editions prepared by fellow academics.

Many rural readers who have not narrowed their interests too specifically, would benefit from a SPERA sponsored series of regular extracts on locally recognisable issues from the world of quality magazines.

Customer oriented education is about:

> making available the world outside a person's normally available experience, to awaken the spirit to the wonders of variety and choice; and

> supporting (often lonely) individuals who refuse to succumb to the surrounding apathy of cultural inertia and negative expectations.

In one village in Malaysia, the whole community selected one gifted child to be supported in his search for educational fulfilment, from the village school to the University of Melbourne. He is now a living symbol in that small community that they are part of the global society, irrespective of the isolation and poverty to which their history and location previously consigned them.

So our primary function as educators should be to encourage and reinforce people in their personal quests for knowledge. We must look long and hard at how to make education attractive, user friendly and individual responsive.

DEFINITIONS FOR 'RURAL'

The western world has a romantic tradition of rural mythologies, from the man from Snowy River to the secrets of pumpkin scones. The literature of the older Commonwealth members is strongly in favour of rural people who, we are repeatedly informed, are physically and morally superior (and if you believe D.H. Lawrence - much sexier).

This pro rural folklore is often misused politically to develop a suspicion of cities and urban people (with the occasional exception of those who 'come back to'). The people who invoke rural legends generally ignore the people who are caught up in grinding long term rural poverty.

The general ignorance of rural people in the reality of their condition is reinforced by local business 'cargo cults' whose leaders strongly exaggerate the local community's amazing, about to be realised, potential; seize every glimmer of development gossip to broadcast their optimism for the brand new future; and bring very strong social pressures to bear against anyone who discusses the ongoing problems of under privileged members of 'the community'.

Rural must no longer be restricted to mean the opposite of the urban. If rural issues are to be resolved in Australia, then the term rural should be redefined, to bring in the much bigger number of people who suffer from the rural problems of disadvantage, and in so doing attract real political support. It means the hundreds of thousands of people who live on the metropolitan edges, with severe restrictions on access and services.

So "rural" should be expanded to mean any human environment which results in the existence of forms of isolation, caused by economic, geographic, physical and social disadvantages, which inhibit people from realising their full enjoyment and potential as members of Australian society. The potential role for SPERA's customers should therefore include the urgent and necessary task of informing urban and rural Australians:

> of the similarities of the day to day intractable problems created by
> the tyranny of deprived access; and

> illustrate the reality of their lonely lifestyles.

Participation in music provides a useful illustration. Unless you live in a metropolitan area, with willing chauffeur-parents, it is impossible to participate in a children's orchestra (which need at least 40 string players and, more importantly, a few weirdos who can and will play the bassoon, oboe, and tympanum). It also explains why, when my family moved to Euroa, my father ended up playing the trombone in a very small citizens' band. It was making music, agreed, but in no way could it replace playing the euphonium in the great Tramways marching band on Anzac day in Melbourne.

There are many important human activities, like playing in an orchestra, where the numbers make all the difference. Rural people should never attempt to cover up the limitations created by small scale communities and long distances to larger population centres.

APPLIED EDUCATION: SOME EXAMPLES

The focus, style and substance of education must shift according to the needs of the students. There is an enormous difference between Melbourne University and the 'Broady TAFE', between a comfortable, sophisticated ivory tower and the hard concentration on practical training for urgently needed jobs.

Some of the newer institutions are bridging the gaps in education by developing new markets:

Barton College of TAFE now attracts students from Malaysia, it is no longer a purely local training facility;

the University of NSW has developed a National Centre for Banking and Capital markets which introduces world class experts on EFTPOS to the employees of the People's bank of China.

These examples point the way to broadening the universe of education by following Michael Power's adage: do what you can do well, to succeed in your local markets; then improve your business by exploring the appropriate niches in the global market for educational services.

RURAL SOCIAL AND SPECIALIST EXAMPLES

1)   The Australian Council for Women consultation with women in remote communities across Australia has shown that women want privacy and choice in rural services, when and where their personal schedules permit. Their education and training needs must be achievable, for true equity of opportunity, even against entrenched community relationships (eg, where the aggressive, physically abusing husband is on the Shire Council and is 'best mates' with the only local GP and solicitor).

2)   The Latrobe Regional Hospital is developing communication strategies to try to stop local community leaders bickering over which declining area will get its own specialist services. With less money available each year the major issue is how to create the best possible service, at the optimum location in population and logistics - not where the local placemen feel most satisfies their interests.

3)   The Adelaide nephrology/oncology services business plan is designed to adapt new technologies to provide specialist services for indigenous people in remote areas, isolated metropolitan centres like Darwin, and population service centres on the Southwest Pacific Rim.

The three examples indicate the range of potential needs which can only be satisfied by expanding the universe of education. They also draw attention to the 'first law' of mechanical engineering - never bother to invent something until you have checked if it is available in the nearest hardware store!

THE THREE MAJOR TASKS

There are three major tasks which should be undertaken urgently in providing education for rural people in Australia:

educating people to understand their own needs and demands;

educating people to the irreversible and unavoidable changes which will transform the economy and society of rural Australia within their lifetimes;

educating people on the range of facilities, support services and technologies which they can use to enhance their cultural, economic, personal and social well being.

The first task: educating people to understand their own needs and demands.

Most rural and community needs must be satisfied by do-it-yourself and self-help action with neighbours and members of the local community. Waiting for outside funding or support can mean, in effect, taking basic lessons in learning to live with the results of inaction!

Example - many single parents in rural areas, like the people on the edges of the metropolitan areas, suffer from poor or no public transport services. There is a growing rural and fringe phenomenon for people with low incomes to seek low rent housing at a distance from community services, at the cost of using some of the 'savings' on low cash cost vehicles. They soon need help in servicing their vehicles. A Coolaroo West project brought women together to learn how to maintain their vehicles (there is very little real mystery, just the inertia of tradition and gobbledegook of vested interests). They then took lessons in how to drive the community bus. Their lifestyle choices were significantly expanded, along with their sense of achievement and self esteem.

Example - let us use the school bus system to its capacity as a learning experience for the children, with built in TV and compulsory seat belts; drivers who care and are trained custodians; and include the extension of the use of these wasted resource vehicles for a range of cultural, economic, personal and social purposes in the evenings and at weekends, for the school children and their communities.

Example - Our investigations into community problem solving in rural Australia indicate there are hundreds of similar groups busy inventing wheels, mostly square, to get around their problems. SPERA could provide a clearing house of "this is really how we did it" catalogues. Central and local governments could be invited to provide head start funding for the catalogue. The Victorian Community Transport Association will get funding from the Minister for Public Transport to produce a catalogue of successful, volunteer driver access services (nb: it can take time to insert sensible, low cost, do it yourselves programs into busy government agencies, so it is necessary to develop patience as part of the working methodology while Governments are making up their minds).

SPERA could accomplish the first task by deliberately leading the search for the real rural needs of the 21st century. The process should begin with descriptions, not prescriptions, and start by exploring the needs of the present portfolio of SPERA customers, under the Program heading:

Help SPERA Describe Rural Living -

Like YOU Know It Really Is!

The program headings should involve:

       listening to people, sharing your views with them, searching out and exploring their ideas;

       collaborating with people in your region (a region simply means a communications centre around which people have agreed common agendas);

       learning about and exploring your actual and potential needs as rural people;

       generating responses for SPERA through focus groups, workshops and from talk back radio (the added bonus is to rescue the regional media from its trivialities);

       quantifying themes with follow up polls, based on the reality of popular needs, which can stand scrutiny from opponents by the use of real costs and benefits statements.

The end product of the process will encourage the urban populations of Australia to discover the complex reality of the lives of their rural neighbours. This understanding will encourage our fundamentally urban political structures to focus their support towards the reality, as opposed to the mythology, of the needs of contemporary rural citizens.

The second task: educating people to the irreversible and unavoidable changes which will transform the economy and society of rural Australia within their lifetimes.

Our investigations indicate that many rural people are confused (and certainly not enlightened by the local booster media) over the irreversible and unavoidable changes which are transforming the economy and society of rural Australia. They have no way of learning about the nature of the changes, nor of the speed at which they are occurring.

SPERA can lead the way to reality for many rural people. It can offer distance education programs to encourage rural people and their urban neighbours to explore the spectrum of change to find the answers to the vital questions:

> What is really happening to your region's economic base, and your personal lifestyle, from the effects of market shifts in agriculture, fisheries, forestry and mining?

> How is the structure of work, and the consequent effects on employment opportunities for young people, being affected by technological innovations in primary production in your region?

> What is the real, on the ground evidence of community and personal improvement behind the hyperbole on 'regional development'?

> What are the real opportunities in tourism in your region, and for whom?

> Do you have any examples which prove that the people interested in conservation can be found outside urban Australia?

> What is happening in your region through the demographic changes in rural Australia which have been created by economic and social forces of the past few decades?

> What is it really like to live in declining towns and fading regions, where the courts, hospitals and social services have been moved away?

Relevant education must start with an honest examination of the good, the bad, and the ugly. You would never know from the rural media. What do you do when your neighbours move away and you are the last woman/teenager/old person in the area?

What can the rural survivors tell people about their discoveries? Can you translate the ache of loneliness into blessed solitude? How is your life really?

If SPERA can help to educate people to provide their answers to these human consequences of rural change, there will be many Australian issues, masked by 'politics', which can be realistically resolved.

The vital significance of these explorations lies in the realpolitik of Rural - Urban power shifts. The closer the definition of 'rural' (via actual examples) can link country Australia and its needs to the needs of other isolated people, irrespective of their living places the better. Linking rural issues with the 'National Party' means that in the coming decades rural people will lose politically, whoever wins the next few elections.

SPERA can expand the universe of education for rural Australians most effectively by realigning education to these political imperatives, and by encouraging rural people to study themselves and to report honestly on their changing economic, physical and social environments.

The third task: educating people on the range of facilities, support services and technologies which they can use to enhance their cultural, economic, personal and social well being.

Information is the pivotal answer to self knowledge, but it must fit the need to know and the availability of the means to know. How to find out is often the hardest part of starting to solve any serious problem. The manuals about how to do it always seem to start on page six! The first five missing pages should tell you how to understand the manual.

Access is the major problem for many people living in the low population densities which are typical of rural and exurban Australia. No matter how good the service, getting there is the fundamental requirement. ACW country consultations showed clearly the significance of transport, communications and the logistical problems involved in meeting other human beings at first hand.

Some access problems can be managed by using distance communication techniques. The available technologies represent the first geographically independent communicating tools developed in world history. They deal in cyberspace. Contemporary technology encompasses linear and non linear information and varying levels of interaction. We have to work the technology to get the results.

Example - People can learn to use the dials and get on to talk back radio about real issues with their neighbours across the region. It is possible to set up new networks of people using 'person to person radio' in the off peaks (for country radio a major slice of the 24 hours). Communication innovations in television, faxes, internet and cellular telephones are increasingly concerned with personal interaction. They offer new ways to other people and institutions, and to information galore!

Technical equipment and systems are readily available, but the price involves ability, money, training and educational resources. Many Australian citizens in rural areas have their educational opportunities seriously inhibited by the tyranny of distance, which thus reinforces and maintains the syndrome of a lifetime in poverty. The distribution of the technological equipment which can redress the balance should therefore become a matter of high priority on SPERA's agenda. Once the information services and networks can be made available to rural areas, Australians can design and build their own personal communication systems.

SPERA should demand the support of central and local governments in providing technological equipment for rural areas. The budget allocations can be provided under the heading of educational programs - community service obligations. These obligations would ensure that every Australian, irrespective of age or location of residence, should be able to afford the means for personal development through educational opportunities which are generally available in the urban community.

The issue will not be resolved by the technology alone. When all else is working, personal support and educational reinforcement must be available to provide the missing link between rural individual needs and the achievement of the positive values represented in SPERA's vital endeavours.

Does SPERA have a positive policy about this which can stand up to metropolitan scrutiny?

WHAT CAN SPERA DO?

Australians have a history of innovation in satisfying the educational needs of people whose disadvantages are created and maintained by distance. SPERA's work in these vital directions can make a major contribution to the thousands of millions of people in the world who share most of our problems, with very few if any of our advantages. There is serious work for Australians in these concepts and, as the members of the 'Peace Corps' of President Kennedy's day discovered, people who leave their countries for a time to serve others, return with benefits which at least match the significance of their overseas contributions.

The problem is too vast to be managed on the SPERA level of budget. It should therefore provide the basis of a bipartisan political party educational program (like lobbying but with heart) and would start with a network analysis to find out who, in SPERA, knows whom, in politics. The time is ripe for the preparation and presentation of ideas to the parties before they develop the impenetrable mindsets which will provide their armour for the coming federal election. The strategy should include:

> investigating SPERA's files and customer responses to clarify the unmet educational needs of rural and fringe urban people, actual and potential;

> developing SPERA case studies to illustrate the gulf between the educational opportunities available to rural and fringe urban people and those available generally in the metropolitan and major provincial centres;

> starting the process of communicating, marketing issues and discovering the way to influence the educational budget controllers of Australia.

These concepts may concern people through their scale and complexity. But to the best of our knowledge, there is no other Society which can even begin to start the process.

SPERA already has a very significant track record in helping people to surmount the barriers to their educational opportunities. It provides an ideal, and thoroughly legitimate basis for SPERA to challenge Australians: to start to resolve the issues of access to educational opportunities for everyone in the global society of the 21st Century.

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