

# REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING REMOTE AND ISOLATED CHILDREN

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*"This is Mr Rogers, broadcasting through the Port Augusta Royal Flying Doctor Service on channel 5148 calling in all my Year 4 children for your 12 noon Air Lesson. Good afternoon....."*

In term 3 of last year I had a 10 week contract to teach a class of 14 year 3/4 children at the School of the Air (SOTA) at Port Augusta. This is South Australia's only School of the Air and it is a campus of the Open Access College in Adelaide. I have been a primary teacher for many years but this was the first time that I had taught remote and isolated children using Air lessons and Distance Education lesson materials. Over the years I had myself studied as an external student using Distance Education materials so I had some appreciation of what it feels like to learn this way.

## 1 Lesson materials

From my time spent teaching at SOTA, my major impression was that the children in my class were in no way academically disadvantaged from their peers in schools with face to face teaching. I thought that the Distance Education materials used were excellent. They were up-to-date and reflected the National Curriculum Statements and Profiles for all the Key Learning Areas. My year 4 children were learning Indonesian as their LOTE. This was taught from Adelaide using tele-conferencing.

## 2 Student Work

I found the spread of children's academic and artistic ability in my class reflected the wide range I had found in fact to face classes. However, I maintain that the actual amount of work produced by my SOTA children was by far in excess to what I had encountered with year 3 and 4 children in the primary schools where I had taught. I will never forget some of the outstanding research and published materials on Emperor Penguins and Antarctica produced by the year 4 SOTA children. I discussed with my colleagues that I felt it was a pity that such exceptional work could not be more widely disseminated to a wider audience for others to see, learn and appreciate. Whenever children sent in audio tapes as part of their work to be marked, I always made a point of including some of them in my Air Lessons. This was another way I could share some of their work.

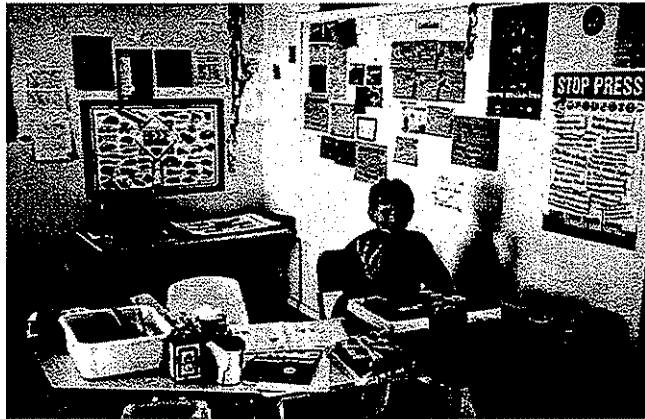
## 3 Air lessons

Each day I had two half-hour lessons - one with the year 3 group and the other with the year 4. These air lessons needed careful planning and preparation and every student knew beforehand what the subject and topic would be for that day's Air Lesson. (At the end of each term a new term planner was distributed to the children and their supervisors.) The subjects covered in the air lessons tended to be those that sometimes missed out, such as Science and Technology, Human Society in the Environment, Creative Arts, Health and every Thursday we had Music for our Air Lesson. Although I am not very musical, I was able to "survive" because of the excellent Distance Education lesson materials that were provided.

The highlight of the week for both the children and myself were the Friday Air Lessons that were conducted by the children. Each child was rostered in turn to conduct their own Air Lesson and they approached their turn with a good deal of effort and enthusiasm. The whole lesson was entirely in their 'hands' from calling the roll to message time at the end. Sometimes it was necessary for me to relay to some children who may have had difficulty hearing due to poor reception. The children were free to choose their own theme for the lesson, though most tended to choose art/craft activities - crayon spatter; a fire collage; 'snow' scene (crushed egg shells in baby oil!) etc. Science was also a popular choice and some of their experiments often required close adult supervision, especially when matches or explosions were involved!

The children always sent out weeks beforehand (usually via the SOTA's fax) lesson notes which contained a list of the materials that were needed to be ready for the lesson. At the end of these student-run lessons, I was always delighted to hear the students voluntarily call in to thank their classmate for conducting such an interesting and enjoyable session.

While conducting my Air lessons, I found that it was necessary to modify my questioning technique from the way I normally operated in face to face teaching. It became apparent to me early on that if you asked a question (open or closed) and waited for the children to call in, usually it was only a few who dominated - some never responded. So I made it a special point to always ask questions to individual children and made sure all received equal attention by using tally marks for responses alongside their names.



Todd Williams, Mt Barry station

I had one girl in year 3 who was very shy. At the beginning of the term whenever I asked her an open question, I would only receive a one-word response. However, over the term as I got to know her during the Air lessons, I noticed that her confidence and general enthusiasm towards learning changed dramatically. I felt that her talking with tourists may have assisted this change in attitude. The teacher who normally took the 10:00 o'clock Air Lesson in studio one for the visiting tourists, went on a class camp for a week so I took over studio one. During that week, I invited the tourists into the studio to talk with my students. Fortunately, one of the Itinerant Teachers happened to be visiting my year 3 girl, so I prearranged for her to be "coached" beforehand. While talking with the tourists, she was able to confidently

describe the location of the station where she lived, the size, stock, schoolroom, wildlife etc. She had also 'prepared' some questions to ask the tourists about where they came from and so on. By the end of that week she had become really talkative and obviously enjoyed the extra attention. At the end of the term she was a different girl, much more confident and out going.

One of the down sides of the Air Lessons was the unpredictability of the reception that was largely determined by the prevailing weather conditions. Some days the reception (either transmission or receiving) was so bad, that some children had to miss their lesson. At the school all of the primary children in years 5, 6 and 7 had access to a PC and the Internet (via satellite phones) and so these students increasingly made use of this means of communication with their teachers. Air Lessons for these children often included instructions on using a wide range of PC computer software. In the studios there were phone bridges which enabled some students to participate in Air Lessons using a telephone conference facility whenever transmission or reception was poor. (Unfortunately each "bridge" could only accommodate four lines at a time.)

#### **4 Home Visits**

The home visits I made during the term were another highlight. The good *old-fashioned* country hospitality was fantastic. It was good for me to see the schoolrooms and local surroundings of some of my children. I was intrigued to be able to be at the receiving end of the Air Lessons - in the studio I often tried to visualise what it was like at the other end. I can remember at the beginning of the term, I asked each child to describe what they saw when they looked out of their school room window. I received some really delightful descriptions. At the three stations that I visited I was amused that the term "smoko" still survives, despite all the health ramifications of smoking. From my Health lessons I know that my children were all well aware of the health implications of smoking.

#### **5 Supervisors**

During my term at SOTA, I developed a deep respect and admiration for the children's supervisors, especially those who were also the children's parents. I found that the supervisors were keen to explore new ideas and strategies that might lead to improvements in the children's learning outcomes.

I was also greatly impressed by the commitment and dedication of SOTA parents who attend and contribute to meetings that seek to improve and maximise their children's education. I am not aware of many other schools where parents make such sacrifices of time, travel and accommodation in order to attend such meetings. I appreciated the interest, support and encouragement of my group of parents, as together we worked towards facilitating their children's education.

During the term a number of my students received extra support from visiting REVISE teachers. These are usually retired teachers who voluntarily visit stations for several weeks to provide additional help for the children with their schooling. They were appreciated and proved to be of great benefit for some of the children in my class.

#### **6 SOTA Teachers**

I personally found teaching at SOTA to be very stimulating and rewarding. I appreciated the opportunity to work as part of a team of very talented and dedicated teachers and support

staff. My colleagues were extremely co-operative and supportive, especially at the beginning of the term when I was still "learning the ropes". The school had 6 secondary teachers who taught a range of secondary Distance Education subjects. (They did not use Air Lessons.) I found the secondary component of the school to be very interesting and thought that it provided SOTA with an added dimension.

My time spend at SOTA was a tremendous learning experience for me. I learnt so much about the distance education of remote and isolated children. I think I made more ticks (during my marking) than I had done during most of my previous years of teaching! I now have developed a repertoire of radio skills and I am sure that my listening skills have improved. My final impression of SOTA is that it is truly a community of collaborative learners - the children, staff, parents / supervisors and friends all learning from each other. This is surely what is at the heart of life-long learning.



Geoff Rogers at the radio console