The Garth Boomer Memorial Lecture
September 21, 2005

Presented by
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"We Need to Go Beyond Back to Basics and Forward to Fundamentals"
(Garth Boomer): What ought it mean for us today and into the future?

This Address is inspired by my memory of Garth, his values, his words, and his passion to urge all of us to go beyond the basics and forward to fundamentals. Were he alive today I have no doubt that in responding to the Conference metaphors of “blurring the boundaries” and “sharpening the focus” he would find occasion to repeat one of his favourite sayings of John Dewey: "never mistake the map for the territory".

Twelve years after his death, I believe that it is vital to reflect over what Garth said, wrote and was committed to as one of Australia’s truly great educators. According to Mark Antony – and Garth would love having Shakespeare quoted in the opening minute – “The evil that men do lives after them; The good is oft interred with their bones”. While that might have been true of Julius Caesar – and, as Mark Antony knew very well it was not, although it served his rabble-rousing purpose to let the Roman mob gathered around Caesar’s body think that this would be the common view – it is definitely not true about Garth Boomer. Nevertheless, I fear that too much of Garth’s ‘good’ may have already been washed away in the sands of time.

One of the splendid characters in our world of English, who knew Garth so very well, is Peter McFarlane. In his masterly article “To Strive, to Seek, to Find and not to Yield”, which he wrote very soon after Garth died, Peter described “Garth as teacher, consultant, administrator, writer, orator and friend”. He wrote that “One of Garth’s secrets as a learner and educator was that his growth always seemed to take place in conjunction with others.” He recalls Garth frequently saying that "I am a part of all that I have met", quoting from Tennyson’s Ulysses ........” (McFarlane 1993: 18)

But Garth was no boring, self-absorbed egghead. Very far from it. Indeed, I imagine he would have loved to have played Falstaff in Shakespeare’s Henry IV. Garth had a great sense of humour.

In his article Peter McFarlane told us that, at Garth’s request, those famous lines which Garth revered, ‘to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield’ from Ulysses were read at his funeral and were also inscribed on his funeral plaque. We were also reminded that Garth’s friends “remembered how important it was for him not to ‘rust unburnished’ but to ‘shine in use’ (McFarlane 1993: 19). I would hope that my Address today might be seen as one small attempt to ensure that his legacy does not ‘rust unburnished’ but - even if only vicariously 12 years after his death - continue to ‘shine in use’.

So, I will be citing Garth’s own words at various points in my Address. As well as being a remarkable orator, Garth was an equally remarkable and prolific writer. I will also walk briefly across Garth’s- and my own - beloved terrain of English literature, language and literacy, in attempting to sharpen the focus on what we should conserve
from our past and present educational territories and maps, and what we should transform.

Like so many others, I learnt so much about education from Garth – right across the spectrum from his insights and passions which I assimilated in my day to day life as a teacher of English (and History) in secondary schools; to the nature of the English curriculum; to how to participate effectively in the declared and undeclared wars endlessly waged by the troglodytes against ‘us good guys’; to how to cope with political realities over which one had no control; right down to how to face up to the death sentences which he and I were delivered by medical specialists. Garth died so tragically and prematurely on Friday July 16, 1993 in Adelaide at the age of 52 – having been diagnosed with terminal cancer of the brain only a year or so before. In late 1996 I too was diagnosed with terminal Motor Neurone Disease – and told that I had between three and five years to live.

During Garth’s final illness, Dr Patricia Edgar, who was the Director of the Australian Children’s Television Foundation, visited me in Canberra. She told me that she was seeking somebody to replace Garth on the Board of that wonderful organisation, chaired by Janet Holmes a’Court. Somebody had told Patricia that I had similar ideas, commitment, and educational values to those of Garth. I felt both flattered and humbled by the comparison. But, I hasten to add that I was also relieved that Patricia did not want me to be the hugely larrikinish, mischievous, gregarious colossus that was uniquely Garth. There was, and there will only ever be, one Garth Boomer.

I don’t know how well known it is, but during the final months of his working life Garth devoted much time, expertise and passion to writing the lyrics and the music that formed an essential part of that magnificent series produced by the Australian Children’s Television Foundation, Lift Off. I also don’t know how well known it is that Garth played a strong hands-on role in incorporating Howard Gardner’s ‘learning styles’ within the written and visual scripting of Lift Off.

Conserving the Best, Transforming the Rest*

In this Address I would like to sharpen the focus on a question that is so often blurred in contemporary educational discourse. What is worth valuing in school education now and into the foreseeable future; and what is not? I suppose you could say that the greatest challenge we face in education as we look forward is that, while we must conserve what is of timeless value in education and schooling, we must also transform some of what now passes for education and schooling. Anyone familiar with Garth’s writings and speeches would know how strongly he would have supported a sharp focus on articulating this distinction: and acting on it. Let me start with some large-scope issues within some contemporary settings.

While always acknowledging the flaws in pedagogical policy and practice, Garth also always championed quality teaching and learning and celebrated the achievements of those responsible for its articulation and implementation. He had no time for the loud, opinionated, jeremiahs who almost instinctively condemn contemporary education holus-bolus within newspapers and other media outlets only too willing to publicise and propagate jaundiced, populist ignorance. I am not referring to well

* In parts of the following section, I draw upon my earlier publication Brock, P, “Education and Schooling: Looking Forward, Looking Back – And Hoping to Arrive”, in S. Dinham (ed.) Transforming Education: Engaging with Complexity and Diversity, Australian College of Educators, Canberra, 2003
argued, evidence-based, constructive criticism – far from it. We always need to
critique the quality of teaching and learning. But there is a significant difference
between well informed, evidence-based criticism and some of what passes for
educational critique within the columns of certain publicists who seem to enjoy
untrammelled access to newspaper print. Who seem selectively to choose from
research or, indeed, misrepresent or misunderstand research, scholarship, policy and
practice as they prop up and propagate their own ideological biases about the nature
of learning, teaching and schooling.

A second large area of conserving the best and transforming the rest that I wish to
identify is one that infuriated Garth and what I call the ‘Perennial Literacy Crisis’
syndrome. I refer to the wails of horror – usually based on nothing more than
prejudice – at the assumed literacy crisis of the present compared with an allegedly
literacy nirvana of the past. I have researched and written about these furphies over
many years.

For example, just over three years after Garth’s death and a few months into the first
Howard government, from October 1996 onwards the nation was assailed by
assertions that one in three of all Year 9 students in Australia could not read nor write.
I’d like to quote from a monograph of mine (Breaking some of the myths – again,
Literacy Discussion Papers, No. 1, NSW Department of Education and Training, 1998)
in which I exposed this assertion for the furphy that it was.

Throughout (1996) and, often since, we have heard this assertion
repeated as ‘gospel truth’ by certain politicians, journalists, some talk-
back radio jockeys, and assumed to be true in various current affairs
programs. The day after the outraged Minister Kemp launched the story
(5 months before the ACER Report was published) the ABC’s “AM”
program’s presenter prefaced Ross Solly’s interview with the Minister on
22 October 1996 as follows:

“A twenty year survey has revealed that about a third of fourteen year
olds don’t have basic skills. The Federal Schools Minister, David Kemp,
says the figures show that education policy and practice over the past
twenty years has failed and in some cases there’s actually been a decline
in standards” (AM 1996).

Dr David Kemp issued statements of outrage through media outlets all
over the place that the ACER’s survey had proved that one in three Year
9 Australian students were virtually illiterate and that it had shown a
serious decline in standards since the equivalent 1975 survey.

Of course, the survey had shown nothing of the sort.

I and some of my academic colleagues, as well as two outstanding
journalists Brian Toohey in both the Australian Financial Review and the
Sun-Herald, and Adele Horin in the Sydney Morning Herald, have
exposed this as yet another myth. The comprehension ‘test’ claimed to
measure what the ACER defined as “mastery literacy” in students. Not
“basic skills”. Not “functional literacy”. To be so classified, a student
had to get 80% of the answers correct: nothing less. About one third of
the students scored less than 80%.
All of these things were made perfectly clear in a two page ‘support’ document produced at the time jointly by EPAD and ACER and distributed to people like myself keen to look at the data upon which Dr Kemp’s claims had been made but who found out that the report itself had not even been written - and was not due to appear for approximately five months!

“The tests do not measure ‘functional literacy’, nor are they as wide ranging as assessments such as the current National English Literacy Survey, which assesses progress against curriculum profiles in the domains of reading, writing, listening, speaking and viewing.

In the context of literacy tests, ‘mastery’ means the capacity of a student to correctly answer (sic) items used to measure performance on a set of specific items. ........Following reviews of existing research on this question, the prescribed level for mastery was set at ‘correct answers to 80% of the population of all particular items associated with a task or objective’. Thus in the 1995 test the 30% of students deemed not to have a mastery of literacy have failed to achieve an 80% correct mark on the literacy testiv.

In a delightfully bizarre twist, Brian Toohey decided to ask Martin Flanagan, The Age journalist who was the very author of the comprehension passage used in the test, to take the test himself. And what did the author score? 60%! There were two questions which asked students to state what the author meant. Flanagan got both of these ‘wrong’: or rather, his obviously correct answers were deemed to be ‘incorrect’ by the ACER markers! Flanagan, the author, wrote what the author meant - but the answers determined by the examiners were different. Whose ‘illiteracy’ is on display here?

Anyhow, the text was heavily metaphorical and validly open to a variety of interpretations. As Toohey pointed out “what is being tested is not a basic ability to read. Students are expected to give unequivocal answers about the meaning of a piece of prose in which the writer deliberately avoids stating plainly what he means”v.

In its report, which was not released publicly until about 5 months after Dr Kemp had launched the latest literacy furphy rocket into the Australian atmosphere, the ACER explicitly confirmed that its instrument was not one to assess ‘functional literacy’, or ‘basic skills’, at all.

The published data on the 14 year olds said by the Commonwealth Minister and the media purveyors of gloom and doom to show one-third of Australian 14 year old to be lacking basic skills and to reveal a dramatic decline in standards since 1975, demonstrated but a 2% decline overall drop since 1975. Yet the data described in the media showed a rise of 2% for the NESB girls in the age group - but this same figure of 2% was described in the media as “no noticeable rise!”vi. This is, of course, a patently ridiculous contradiction. The Australian wrote that “while the proportion of Year 9 girls who failed to attain basic literacy (sic) skills was 26 per cent in 1975 and 27 per cent in 1995, there
was an alarming decline in boys’ reading comprehension levels”. A 4% difference was thus interpreted as “alarming”!

But all this playing with statistics further exposes a remarkable ignorance of quantitative research analysis. These tiny percentages fall well beneath the standard percentage ceiling always allowed for error in research analysis of this kind.

And as for screams of declining standards. Even allowing for all the inconsistencies and contradictions already alluded to, there was virtually no difference at all between the performance of the 1975 and 1996 cohorts. The most statistically honest thing to say about published comparisons between the 1975 and 1995 figures is that the performance of the two groups are not significantly different. (Brock, 1998:6-8)

One of the things that I learnt from Garth was in the political domain – which provides a classic context within which tensions between conserving the best and transforming the rest are played out. He told me once that one of the hardest things about rising up the ‘totem pole’ of responsibility and accountability was that as you moved up into these stratospheres you acquired – and had to cope with – a whole range of new knowledge, new contexts, new imperatives, and new responsibilities which meant that decisions you had to take informed by such new realities were seriously susceptible to heavy criticism from your former colleagues whose very positions meant that they could not be privy to such knowledge. During my time on Dawkins’ staff I often had to deal with that kind of situation.

The second important lesson in realpolitik that I learnt from Garth was that sometimes you have to concede a battle to win a war. For example, we on Curriculum and Assessment Committee (CURASS) of the Australian Education Council (AEC) of the Commonwealth State and Territories Ministers of Education were supposed to report on all Key Learning Areas (KLAs) to the Ministers, Commonwealth, State and Territory, by June 30 1991.

After this, the Ministers for Vocational Employment, Education and Training (MOVEET) were to take over the nationally consistent education and training agenda. But by early 1991 it had become obvious to me that CURASS could not deliver a quality package before the deadline. English, Mathematics, and Science were well on track to deliver on time – but the rest of the KLAs would not achieve the quality of these three.

For a start, most of the other KLAs had not enjoyed the degree of national consultation that had characterised the preparation of the National Statements and Profiles in English, Mathematics and Science. So I went to Garth and urged him to seek an extension of time from the Ministers. He was adamant that he would not. He agreed with my analysis. But his reason for refusing was political – and made sense. He said something like this. “For years the Ministers and senior bureaucrats in the VET sector have pilloried those of us in the school sector as being far too warm and fuzzy and entirely unable to deliver on national deadlines. If we beg for more time this will merely confirm that view and set back the school sector. We will be perceived as ill-disciplined and sloppy. It would be political suicide for us in the schools sector to be seen as wimps in this crucial period of education and training reform.”

Without upsetting our friendship, Garth resolutely stuck to his guns. As Peter McFarlane wrote “Even in his final job as Associate Director-General of Education with
all its formality and immense pressures, he was still the ‘pragmatic radical’ in the seat of power, being loyal to his supporters in receiving friendship, and trust in return” (McFarlane 1993: 19).

So Garth pushed on. And Dr Ken Boston, who took over from Garth when Garth became too ill, completed the job. And for all the limitations of those KLA National Statements and Profiles and notwithstanding all of the hocus-pocus pouring out too often from Canberra, I believe that more than a decade later they still hold up very well as indicators of nationally consistent curriculum.

If we are serious about educational reform, by “transforming the rest” we will need to be confronted by provocative and controversial views and questions – but they may be the very ones that we must listen to, to interrogate, and to critique. If, and when, our critique reveals that we must make changes – however disturbing this may be to our comfortable couch of the status quo – then we must do so before we drown in a sludge of antiquated irrelevance and brain-dead educational practices.

Indeed, informed critique, imagination, creativity, innovation, knowing, and caring will have to be the principal talismans of effective education now and into the future. It is so easy merely to uncritically accept the rectitude of the status quo. Garth used to love shocking people out of any complacency based on uncritiqued assumptions about the status quo. For example in an article “Fighting Institutional Contamination” in now long defunct innovative journal Category B: Papers from the Alternative English Cooperative, No 9 November 1984, Garth ventured into dangerous territory. He wanted to challenge any assumptions within the teaching profession that it was not possible to articulate the principles of excellence in teaching: to be explicit about standards. His opening lines are worth quoting.

Besides teaching, the only profession that codified its practices, in a sense of establishing commonly accepted principles and procedures, is prostitution. And a good thing, it is, you might argue. ‘Teaching is an art which defies codification. Serendipity, panache, style, idiosyncrasy, artistry and ingenuity are what teaching thrives on.’ You may see teaching as a variegated impressionistic art form.

Now, you may seem codification of education as a lethal form as hardening of categories; an attempt to establish the clinic in the classroom; a manifestation of 1984. As benevolent anarchists you may give three cheers for the chaos which gives you room to move.

Let me try to disturb such thinking a little.” (Boomer 1984: 24)

Under the heading “Public Lies” Garth proceeded to articulate a masterly defence of the quality of exemplary teaching while at the same time insisting that “the rhetoric of systems bears little relationship to what happens.” He insisted that there is a gap between educational practice and a rhetoric that “purports that schools are institutions of learning; places that foster personal development, independence, rationality, democracy and cooperation.” (Boomer 1984: 26)

In his article, Garth typically takes the intelligent, balanced high ground between, on the one hand, the rhetorically flourishing statements of educational aspirations. And, on the other, those in education who continue to perpetrate policies and practices that don’t warrant being called educational. Garth wrote the following.
In the public mediated spiel of our profession we elevate dreams to the level of intentions and facts and thereby commit our teachers to collusion in hypocrisy condemning them to various degrees of guilt, shame or cynicism.

Meanwhile, at the local level, parents who know what stakes their children are running for, tend to talk with teachers about what really happens, and what really matters; about discipline, homework, marks and job aspirations. .............

(But), the system has inbuilt ‘teeth’ which all but ensure the non-adoption of its own proposed innovations. Teachers are disciplined and ‘normalised’ in various ways. There are, for instance, subtle and not so subtle promotional and peer opinion penalties for risk taking teachers who seek to increase student powers and rights. Furthermore, just as the working classes can be shown in various ways to collude in their own oppression so students often tyrannize teachers back into modes of teaching which do not require them to exert mental labour and which keep them ignorant. The fragmentation of time into brief lessons, bites into intentions to explore and speculate, reinforcing habits of dictation and recitation. Teachers on all sides are enticed to go with the grain.

Interrupting the discourse

If you find the foregoing depiction of education to be a little sweeping, a little bleak, a distortion of what you think happens, remember this is a paper of the importance of interruption; about reading our more precious fictions against the grain to expose absurdities, false constructions and incongruencies. My opposition reading of teaching leads me to such provocations ........my counter reading (helps) me ...... to understand the courage and energy required by teachers to interrupt the many rituals which waft like musack through the walls of education.” (Boomer 1984: 26-27)

Typically, Garth was sticking his neck out putting these things in writing. He was a very senior person in education. In the year he wrote this, 1984, he had been appointed as Director of the then Wattle Park Teachers Centre – which was the Curriculum and Teacher Development Centre for the South Australian education system. In 1985 he was appointed Chairman of the Commonwealth Schools Commission, in Canberra.

Many remember the clever way in which Garth would sometimes try to save his neck – by theatrically distinguishing between his ‘public’ and ‘private’ voice. He would have two hats sitting under the rostrum. He would identify one of them as his public hat and the other as his private hat. At appropriate times in his perorations Garth would put on his public or private hat as appropriate to what he was saying: often, his most controversial declamations were issued with him wearing his private hat. Incidentally, the hat I am wearing today is that of being a Fellow and a Sir Harold Wyndham Medallist of The Australian College of Educators: I am not speaking officially ‘on behalf of’ the NSW Department of Education and Training.
Garth also had a truly international dimension to his aspirations for education: in which the challenges of conserving the best and transforming the rest are obviously of global immensity. In the very year that Garth died, 1993, John Ralston Saul published his brilliantly incisive book Voltaire’s Bastards: The Dictatorship of Reason in the West. Without question, what Ralston Saul reckoned was the dictum that drove the goals of the last two decades of Voltaire’s life- “our dominant passion must be for the common weal” – could be applied also to Garth. (Saul 1993: 6)

Garth acknowledged the profound contribution that the provision of high quality, equitably accessible school education makes to that dominant passion for the common good, not only to the social capital of Australia, but also what it should contribute to the world as a whole.

Incidentally, we in the western developed world need to speak with less certainty and more modesty when proclaiming generalisations about the educational future. Even as impressive a document as UNESCO’s Learning: The Treasure Within is not flawless here. It insists that the edifice of global education in the future must be erected upon Four Pillars – those of Learning to Know, Learning to Do, Learning to Live Together, and Learning to Be (Delors 1996: 97).

But for millions of people in our world, in so called ‘developed’ as well as in developing nations there is, however, a fifth pillar – Learning to Survive. Look for example at the scourges of poverty, political impotence, corruption, and AIDS that make personal, communal and national survival so problematic in so many African countries. Or the struggle for survival in some Indigenous Australian communities wrestling with scourges spawned by such things as poverty, dispossession, disease, substance abuse, as well as domestic and sexual violence. Or the struggle for survival within some non-Indigenous Australian communities wrestling with scourges spawned by such things as affluence, greed, disease, substance abuse, as well as domestic and sexual violence.

Last September UNESCO held its 47th session of the International Conference in Education in Geneva. In literature distributed prior to that conference UNESCO pointed out that “at present, half the world’s population is less than 25 years of age: the world has the largest generation of young people it has ever known. More than 1,000 million human beings are between 15 and 24 years of age, and the majority live in the least developed countries. It is also the first generation of young people to grow up with all HIV / AIDS. According to estimates to United Population Fund (UNFPA), in 2020 87% of young people in the world will live in developing countries” (UNESCO International Bureau of Education April / August 2004: 1)

In a recent article published by UNESCO, Rychen and Tiana pointed out that:

We are all familiar with the priorities that the world must address today – technological change, globalisation, identity, quality, poverty, conflicts and signs of ecological distress, to name just a few. In the face of these challenges, there is a wide belief in the contribution of education in favour of social-well being and political stability, as well as productivity and competitiveness. Education is also a basic human right that frees the spirit from the chains of ignorance.” (Rychen and Tiana 2004).

These are views which Garth would have been continuing to champion were he alive today. What is called ‘The War on Terrorism’ – in all its complex and often
contradictory aspects, causes and effects – dominates much of contemporary social, political, and humanitarian discourse as we survey our immediate past, reflect over the present, and contemplate our future. What forces will protect the planet from brutish nuclear Armegeddon? What manifestations of wisdom will identify and expose contemporary intellectual, religious or spiritual ignorance wherever manifestations of such ignorance flourish? What will guide and encourage us to seek, identify and reject political leadership of deceit, of cowardice, of humbug, of corruption - wherever such leadership may be flourishing in the First, Second, Third or any other World?

But equally, what forces will protect us from the evils imposed on and within society under the banner of protecting us from terrorism? What forces do we need to ensure that our civil liberties are not trampled upon? That people are cruelly denied their basic human rights? That those legal rights enshrined in the Magna Carta and other seminal legal testaments that are at the core of our civilised values are not besmirched?

That innocent people on London trains are not only protected from the evil of the cold-blooded killing by terrorists' bombs but also protected from cold-blooded killing by police who then seek to cover up the truth with a farrago of lies?

That finding the truth as to whether children were thrown overboard or were not thrown overboard is important to discover – and those who tell the truth be rewarded rather than punished. How, as an educated democratic community, can we arrive at a proper balance between a necessary insistence on protecting us from terrorists, and a necessary insistence on not stripping ourselves of those very democratic ideals that the terrorists seek to destroy?

We often hear repeated that famous dictum of the great French philosopher, political activist and human rights advocate, Voltaire, that “while I strongly disagree with what you say, I will defend to the death your right to say it” (Saul 1993). I fear that there is a new political correctness, maybe even a new McCarthyism, abroad in Australia. People fear to speak out. For example, just recently in the Higher Education Supplement of The Australian newspaper of September 7th we read about the latest stage in what appears to be the politically correct re-structuring of the former Australian Research Council. We also read assertions that, because the Commonwealth Minister has been personally rejecting research projects recommended by the previously constituted ARC, universities are now getting staff to comb through ARC applications to try to ensure that they do not include the kind of language that the Minister does not like.

If this is true - and I myself do not possess or have access to evidence that would either prove or disprove this assertion - we need seriously to re-read George Orwell and act upon his insights into political correctness and the iterative dismemberment of freedom. Those great novels 1984 and Animal Farm cry out for re-reading. Along with Camus’ The Plague and Huxley’s Brave New World. Incidentally, another saying of Voltaire worth remembering was that “those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities”.

What forces can assist humanity to progress towards that loving human fellowship preached by the charismatic and holy founders of the world’s great religions whose inspiration and sanctity have so consistently been besmirched down the ages by too many of their institutionalised acolytes who have been bigots or selectively fundamentalist?
To reiterate Ralston Saul, in the face of such threats, what forces must drive our “dominant passion … for the common weal”? (Saul 1993) Surely, one dominant force globally will be the establishment, maintenance and enhancement of quality education, accessible to all, in all of its intellectual, moral, spiritual, physical and cultural dimensions. Anywhere and everywhere in the world.

A quality public education that is informed, honest, critiqued, and properly resourced. That is both properly idealistic and properly sceptical. That celebrates the virtues of compassion, justice, human rights. And which repudiates tyranny, ignorance, fundamentalism of all kinds, and terrorism - whatever and wherever be its sources around the globe.

That is a huge ask. But without a truly educated global world we will all be condemned to suffering the inevitable consequences of failing to learn from history and wiping out the world as we know it. For example, without a fully educated population - in the fullest sense of the word “educated” - we in the West will continue to cast a blind eye upon evils before our very eyes: such as was the initial response to the genocide in Rwanda, where the United Nations failed so miserably. Or in the break-up of Yugoslavia where, for too long, the Christian West turned its back on the slaughter of the Muslims - until it was too late. Or where for so long Australia turned its back on the slaughters in East Timor until the Howard Government declared that enough was enough and sent in our police and army to protect those being slaughtered. It will be the properly resourced provision of real, not spurious, education that will hold the key in the future to facilitating informed discourse among people, nations, and trans-national organisations.

Perhaps the principal domain within which I have myself fought for conserving the best and transforming the rest has been that of English Education: encompassing language, literature, and literacy across the contexts of reading, writing, listening and speaking. Garth was our Australian English Education giant within that amalgam of incredible insight, scholarship, passion, explosion in knowledge, commitment to the fundamental centrality of language and learning that burst upon us following the Dartmouth Conference in 1966. From that remarkable crucible in which was fired the best that was known and thought on both sides of the Atlantic as well as from the Antipodes, there flourished a wonderful community of teachers, scholars and researchers in the field of English Education.

Those of us who were contemporaries of Garth participated in a thrilling risorgimento of English language, literary and literacy teaching and learning; with Garth out there within the Australian vanguard. The Australian Association for the Teaching of English, established in the early 1960s and of which Garth was once President, was a most powerful agent and conduit for these reforms. I could name over 20 international leaders who inspired us in those days and with whom Garth rubbed shoulders as an equal.

Peter McFarlane, quite rightly, described Garth as “perhaps Australia’s most distinguished English educator ever” (McFarlane 1993: 18).

In particular, Garth became close friends with the American scholars John Mayher and Nancy Lester. Indeed, very soon after Garth’s death John and Nancy wrote a moving short article “Goodbye Garth” published in the American journal English Education, Volume 25 in October 1993 (pp 188 – 189). The article quite brilliantly painted a
vividly recognisable portrait of Garth: raconteur; scholar; derring-do; gastronome; bon vivant; connoisseur and imbibers of quality red wine; scallywag; singer and dancer; lover of literature; proud Aussie. Reflecting over the good times that they had enjoyed together with Garth, John and Nancy concluded as follows:

Garth used all of these occasions for teaching and learning beyond the classroom walls. Because in the end all of these occasions were an opportunity for connection through language. For Garth, language was the bridge which linked bodies and minds and brought us all in contact with ourselves and each other. He used words for exploration and growth and mateship and he took us with him on his journey to the future. We love you. And we will miss you. We promise to honour the promise to push the envelope as far as we can.” (Mayher and Lester 1993: 189)

Those of us who shared Garth’s educational values and were encultured in the language and learning scholarship thriving in the 1970s and 80s were, and remain, aware of the power and significance of the language that we use and the crucial role that it plays in the public and private domains of life. For example, in 1990 I drafted the Introduction to the Hawke Government’s Green Paper on Australia’s Language and Literacy Policy (The Language of Australia: Discussion Paper on an Australian Literacy and Language Policy for the 1990s). The Federal Minister for Employment, Education, and Training, John Dawkins, agreed to affix his signature to that Introduction. In the opening sentence I attempted to articulate the power and significance of language:

It is through language that we develop our thoughts, shape our experience, explore our customs, structure our community, construct our laws, articulate our values and give expression to our hopes and ideals.

(Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1990: ix)

During my time on John Dawkins’ staff, Don Watson was Prime Minister Paul Keating’s speech writer and was a notable presence within the Ministerial Wing of the Federal Parliament. His book, Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language, deserves to be compulsory reading for every member of every parliament; every public servant; every member of every public and private board; every corporate manager; and every member of the media.

And, perhaps above all, by every educational leader. Were Garth alive today I know how much he would have resonated with Don Watson’s ideas about language.

Watson brilliantly, and savagely, inveighs against the rubbish that so often purports to be effective communication. At times brutally he exposes the politically correct nakedness of imperial managerial-speak clothing. He shows how linguistic sludge - and its uncritical acceptance by a society that should know better - has cast a pall over thinking, imagination, innovation, administration, and enterprise. Superbly Watson exposes the extent to which the language of power - across most of the contexts within which it exercises domain - has become so infested with such conformist muck that it has undermined the very values of contemporary political, corporate, private, and public domains.
As educators we have a responsibility both to resist the blandishments of such language and to ensure that we never resort to such rubbish when leading our troops – whether they be our students or our colleagues.

For many years I myself have been campaigning along similar lines within my own spheres of influence: but not often successfully. As I wrote in my autobiography, A Passion for Life, for a long time I have been gathering examples of – and ‘preaching’ about - the ways in which language has been deployed for all kinds of explicit and implicit purposes; to clarify or to obfuscate; as a weapon of attack or defence; to empower or to disempower; to imperil or to liberate; and so on - across all kinds of diverse contexts.

As educators we should be quintessentially penetrating and lucid in the ways we exercise our thought, ideas and values through the power of language. Sludgy, clichéd, opaque language is evidence of sludgy, clichéd, opaque thinking and feeling.

Another of Garth’s great passions – and which happens to be another one of mine – was his determination to lift the goals of education way above the minimalist horizons of the ‘basics’. The title of this Address was inspired by the cry I heard him utter often: “let’s go beyond back to basics and forward to fundamentals”. On one occasion following a fairly characteristic encounter between Garth and red wine he bellowed “let’s go beyond the bloody back to basics and forward to (expletive deleted) fundamentals” – as always he enjoyed playing around with stylistics of language such as alliteration.

In our pursuit of excellence in education, by conserving the best and transforming the rest, we must never confuse minimalist lowest common denominator skills with highest educational objectives. For example, while it will continue to be crucially necessary that our children acquire basic skills of literacy and numeracy, their acquisition is patently not a sufficient educational imperative in providing students with a well-rounded education.

Central to this pursuit, we educators will need to own up to the sterility, conformism, and regurgitation of information that has characterised too much of what has passed for schooling during the last century. We must take due account of the evolving changes to what is perceived to be ‘knowledge’ and learning: such as multiple intelligences, problem-solving, affective/emotive learning - as well as the imperative to diversify and reshape teaching and learning contexts appropriate to the ever-changing nature of the society within which we will prepare our students to participate effectively.

Now, there is a powerful – and necessary - focus in much of the ‘futurist’ schooling literature upon laying siege to conventional notions of knowledge as stored in 19th century silos and to the traditional notion of the teacher being merely the principal assimilator and distributor of ‘knowledge’ to students. But an extremist response to facing the obvious truth that there is, in this post-industrial age, a phenomenal plethora of ‘knowledges’ and sources of knowledge, might be to argue that there is no need for schools and teachers.

Such an extremist view would assert that all that is be required would be for each student, seated in front of a computer and assisted by sophisticated, customized online tutoring, to acquire and master far more knowledge than could ever be possible in a conventional classroom. But to concede this would be to deny the profound social,
cultural and critiquing and – in the broadest sense of the word - educational raison d’etre of what schooling should be about. Such a view of teaching and learning, merely parked in front of a computer, would satisfy those minimalist constructs of schooling as mastering “basic skills of literacy, numeracy and ICT”; and teaching and learning as merely the dissemination and regurgitation of uncontested, and un-interrogated (or should it be un-interviewed) knowledge. Of course, knowledge and the development of academic skills is by no means the sum total of our focus in schooling.

As we look forward, all of us engaged in teaching and learning will also need to develop a much more tolerant acceptance of the reality that Principals and teachers regularly have to negotiate ambiguities; unsureness; problematics; incertitude; paradoxes; unresolved tensions; balancing short against long term loss or gain; confronting competing forces which have valid strengths within each of them.

Neither life, nor education, nor schooling can be neatly compartmentalized under black hats and white hats – though discernment is called for when we have no option but to have to choose between black or white. And the rich pattern of diversity should never be confused with the grey mush of conformity.

Another necessary transformation will be bridging those gaps between educational stages that so often damage the continuity and development of a student’s learning – between the ‘graduate’ experience at the top of one educational stage, and the ‘neophyte’ experience at the bottom of the subsequent stage.

For example, the self-assured graduates of our primary school must stop being treated as babies in Year 7 at secondary school. It is my personal view that this is one of the recurring, ‘dumbing-down’ blights on the whole educational enterprise corroding student learning across transitions: for example, from prior-to-school to kindergarten; between end-of-schooling to starting tertiary education; and even between finishing undergraduate studies and commencing post-graduate education.

While conserving the entirely necessary focus on educational ‘outcomes’, we must continue to emphasise to the bean-counters and the number-crunchers that teaching is a rare profession in that we hardly, if ever, learn the full impact we have made on and in the lives of our students. Some educational outcomes we can, and must, assess and measure. But there are many profoundly important ‘outcomes’ that transcend simple measurement and which, indeed, may end up proving to be the most important aspects of our contribution as educators to the lives of our students.

Those responsible for shaping educational policy need to have a sound historical perspective so that policy might be protected from mindless wheel reinventions or absurd assertions of already failed policies from the past. The longer I spend in this education game, the more I become convinced of the profound importance of having an historical perspective when reviewing and developing policy.

For example, how many more times have we got to put up with the latest guru running around proclaiming allegedly new truths which in reality are as old as the hills. On so many occasions in my career I have been both saddened and astonished to see how such rebadging can so easily acquire respectability and be asserted as unproblematic and self evidently true.
As educators, we will always need to resist, as far as possible, arrogant and self-serving empire building and destructive infighting within and between opposing ‘camps’. We will need to identify and resist those false either/or dichotomies and ideological entrenchments often predicated upon straw-person arguments and sometimes even ‘the cult of personality’. We have to be on our critical alert to identify and contest theory when it becomes dogma; admiration when it becomes worship; bridges that become barricades; concepts that become articles of faith; followers who become acolytes; approaches which become religions; and dissent which becomes heresy - irrespective of the various intellectual or professional cultures from which they may come.

As educators we need to identify and resist those who a British colleague of mine describes as ‘intellectual terrorists'; those who fiercely adhere to their own narrow remedies and who refuse to consider the claims of other theoretical and pedagogical approaches - irrespective of the variegated nature of the learners and the diversity of learning contexts.

We should always be idealists and open-minded to ideas - but we should also be armed with a healthy and informed scepticism of all preachers of orthodoxies and of those pushing their own allegedly ‘new’ agendas that prove to be but old wine in new wineskins. Garth was a master at balancing idealism and scepticism.

I have already referred to the great significance that Garth attached to the role of critique when confronted by status quo policy and practice. And of stressing the dangers that flowed if that critiquing is neglected. He stressed this in his 1984 article when arguing for the need to be explicit about the theory, principles and practices of teaching – and the need for establishing standards by the profession itself: as distinct from having them imposed from the outside.

Returning to my opening point, I want to argue that to assist teachers’ liberation it would help if we began by codifying and explaining, if possible, what actually happens in the act of teaching. I suggested that there is a clear code but that it remains unarticulated so that false representations made by systems and schools go relatively unchallenged. Because it is unarticulated, it is not easily accessible to critique, to deconstruction, to productive interruption and therefore to systematic deliberate improvement. Because we have not exposed the theory behind our present practices, we tend to remain spellbound by habit. And there is the strong possibility that having developed the habit of not looking closely we may be inclined ingenuously and unwittingly to tell lies about what we do. (Boomer 1984: 26 - 27)

In 2000 I took up the challenge laid down by Garth in 1984, by having a crack at articulating and codifying the knowledge, understanding, skills, and values - what Garth summarised in his paper as “practices” - of accomplished teachers in Australian classrooms. I was invited by a consortium of national bodies - each one of which Garth had been closely involved - The Australian Association for Research in Education, The Australian College of Educators and, of course, your own Australian Curriculum Studies Association to write the National Discussion Paper: Standards of Professional Practice for Accomplished Teaching in Australian Classrooms.

In that paper I made a tentative attempt, through a critiqued distilling of the outcomes of recent international and national developments, to stimulate national
discussion by proposing some answers to the fundamental question: “What are the kinds of professional knowledge, understanding, skills and values that characterise accomplished classroom school teachers in Australian schools?” My set of descriptors have since become incorporated into the criteria for the NSW Quality Teaching Awards jointly authorised by The Australian College of Educators and the NSW Minister for Education and Training. Over the past three years the application of these criteria has identified nearly 150 outstanding teachers from right across the teaching spectrum: early childhood; primary and secondary schools; TAFE Institutes; and universities.

I emphasised that the qualities I proposed must be seen as inter-dependent: not reducible to a lock-step ‘tick-a-box’ set of reductionist or decontextualised ‘competencies’; not comparatively ‘weighted’ between or among the various characteristics of accomplishment; and not listed in any necessary order of precedence.

I argued that accomplished classroom teachers in Australian schools demonstrate their professionalism by:

- having a broad, deep, and critically aware knowledge, understanding of and enthusiasm for the intellectual content, discourses, and values associated with disciplines from which the subjects (or curriculum areas) they teach are derived and as appropriate to the specific contexts within which they teach: by being both transmitters and critical interpreters of the knowledge, understanding, skills, and values associated with their subject areas; by recognising that knowledge is often contestable; and by developing programs that fully implement the aims and objectives of the relevant school curriculum.

- enjoying teaching students and by holding the highest expectations of what each student is capable of achieving: being aware of the individual needs, interests, capacities of their students; and challenging their students accordingly by inspiring, motivating, correcting, and supporting their students, even in the face of temporary or apparent failure.

Too often we do not take the concept of student learning seriously: too often there is a gap, or rather a crevasse, between the rhetoric and the reality. Too often learning is equated with students’ assimilating a pile of factual information churned out and regurgitated by teachers and rammed home rote-learning wise by private coaching colleges. How often, for example, do teachers really give our students the opportunity to discover something or to pursue a line of enquiry that could quite legitimately be described as ‘research’.

How seriously do teachers treat the work of their students? For example, at the drop of a hat teachers can set a demanding assignment in, say English or History, which requires considerable research, drafting and redrafting by the student. But how many teachers treat the completed assignment of the student with the attention, respect, and intellectual engagement that they assume their students must put into undertaking such an assignment? How common is it, for example, for students from Year 8 upwards to be weighed down by a slew of assignments from across five or six teachers that all have to be submitted within a few days of each other? And for the work of the students to be responded to merely by a mark, or a letter, or a perfunctory comment or two?
The great sociologist and former Jesuit Priest, Ivan Illich, coined the phrase “the institutionalising of value”. What he meant by this term was that while institutions are usually established to serve the needs of clients – be they school students or patients in hospitals, for example – they too often end up really serving the needs of those in charge of them, whether they be school teachers or doctors and nurses. This is a very powerful instrument to critique our institutions.

We all know about the cognitive learning outcomes we are obliged to seek for our students. But what about the affective, imaginative, personal development, and social values? How do we help our students strive for personal fulfilment and pursue happiness?

Two months ago, I attended a Conference in Vancouver that focussed on one of my hobby-horses: the imperative to incorporate imagination, creativity, the arts, and innovation within teaching and learning in schools. During my time in Canada I noticed a Discovery Channel for Kids on the television. This program splendidly demonstrated some of the points I have been making about the need to take seriously children’s capacity for enquiry and research.

For example, in one program some young students undertook research to identify the possible causes of death of a prehistoric person whose body had been preserved for thousands of years in a glacier and is now in a North American museum. They interviewed a whole range of historians, forensic scientists, geographers and so on.

In another project other students had a go at solving the riddle of the death of an authority on Canadian fauna and flora whose body had been found on the banks of a Canadian lake nearly a century ago. In both cases the research was careful, incisive and driven by a passion to unravel a mystery: to solve historical problems. In a word, to research.

The third principle practised by accomplished teachers that I articulated is that of: treating all students justly and equitably: recognising and appreciating the range of values held by individuals as well as within families, groups, cultures, and the wider school community; and abiding by all statutory, legal, and ethical obligations incumbent upon them as teachers.

- having a sense of humour and being able to empathise with their students.

- exemplifying the qualities that they seek to inspire in their students: including intellectual curiosity and rigour, tolerance, fairness, common sense, self-confidence, respect for self and others, empathy, compassion, appreciation of diversity, and acknowledgment of cultural differences

It is through our behaviour that we give expression to our values: to our very being. Who teachers are is absolutely the foundation of how they teach. One of my favourite characters in Chaucer's Canterbury Tales is the “poure persoun” - the humble and dutiful country priest: “first he wronghte, and afterward he taughte”. We educators should always strive to practise the educational knowledge, skills, understanding, and values that we preach. Every action we undertake as teachers constitutes an implicit or explicit manifestation of our human and professional values.
I went on to argue that accomplished Australian classroom teachers are:

- Reflective practitioners who critique the impact of their teaching and professional values upon students, colleagues, and others in the wider learning community: by having a critical awareness of the role played by their own educational, social, cultural, religious, financial and other background experiences; and how these experiences may have helped to shape their own values, their approach to teaching, and their assumptions about education.

- Displaying adeptness and discernment in the creative use and critical evaluation of information technologies for assisting their own teaching and in advancing the learning of their students.

- Providing regular, accurate feedback to students and monitoring the growth in students’ learning: not only to assist in the assessment of students’ growth as a basis for reporting each student’s achievements against the required learning outcomes regarding what students know, understand, can do, and value as specified by the formal curriculum; but also as a means of judging the effectiveness of their own teaching.

- Demonstrating excellence in the practical, pragmatic craft of teaching and in managing a learning environment that is interesting, challenging, purposeful, safe, supportive, positive, and enjoyable: which fosters cooperation and collaboration, independence, responsibility, and creativity.

- Exercising high communication and interpersonal skills: being exemplary in their own literacy and numeracy practices; and having the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills, and professional values to exercise the crucial responsibility that all teachers have as teachers of literacy and numeracy.

- Being committed to their own professional development: seeking to deepen their knowledge, sharpen their judgment, expand their teaching repertoire, and to adapt their teaching to educationally sound developments arising from authentic research and scholarship.

- Exercising educational leadership: working collaboratively with their colleagues to develop instructional and welfare policies, curriculum and staff development; and helping to ensure that the essential goals of the school as a learning community are met.

- Taking due account of the educational implications of the community’s cultural diversity: in particular, by including within the curriculum those indigenous issues and perspectives necessary to help achieve reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians; and by being sensitive and responsive to the educational issues generated by and within Australia’s multicultural society within the context of continuing to develop a socially cohesive Australian society.

(Brock, 2000: 11)

The OECD’s, Quality in Teaching Report succinctly and accurately described educators as belonging to the “knowing and caring” profession. We all know that teaching is
both an art and a science - and it’s mostly hard, slogging, work. A couple of years ago, following my Keynote Address to open Queensland’s National Literacy and Numeracy Week, the organisers were kind enough to print hundreds of coffee mugs with the following quotation from my Address.

Accomplished teachers are knowers, carers, actors, head coaches, humdrummers, stirrers, listeners, susser-outers, intuiters, empathisers, creators, pacifiers, and masters of repetition - above all, we have to be people who keep hanging in there in the “knowing and caring” profession.

I would like to conclude by summing up my own hopes and aspirations for education by putting them within a very personally focussed context. As some of you know, I have motor neurone disease, an incurable inevitably fatal disease. Given at worst 3 years and at best 5 years to live in 1996, I am a very rare long term survivor. However, for obvious reasons, I have to speak about the future with fragility. So, I would like to finish with a quotation from page 250 of my autobiography A Passion for Life, published 12 months ago by ABC Books.

Therefore, not just as a professional educator, but as a Dad, I want all future teachers of my Sophie and Millie to abide by three fundamental principles that I believe should underpin teaching and learning in every public school.

First, to nurture and challenge my daughters' intellectual and imaginative capacities way out to horizons unsullied by self-fulfillingly minimalist expectations. Don’t patronise them with lowest-common-denominator blancmange masquerading as knowledge and learning; nor crush their love for learning through boring pedagogy.

Don’t bludgeon them with mindless ‘busy work’ and limit the exploration of the world of evolving knowledge merely to the tyranny of repetitively churned-out recycled worksheets. Ensure that there is legitimate progression of learning from one day, week, month, term and year to the next.

Second, to care for Sophie and Millie with humanity and sensitivity, as developing human beings worthy of being taught with genuine respect, enlightened discipline and imaginative flair.

And third, please strive to maximise their potential for later schooling, post-school education, training and employment, and for the quality of life itself so that they can contribute to and enjoy the fruits of living within an Australian society that is fair, just, tolerant, honourable, prosperous and happy. (Brock 2004: 250)

I am confident that most Australian parents share my hopes and aspirations. And, I reckon that Garth would have heartily endorsed these sentiments as soaring beyond the “cabin’d, cribb’d and confined” strictures of the basics and into the really rich and rewarding frontiers of the fundamentals inspired by those words of Tennyson that Garth so much made his own: “to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”.

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