

Visiting Professors

Professor Wilfred Carr, from the University of Sheffield in the UK, is currently visiting Charles Sturt University as a Visiting Professor for six weeks. Professor Carr will be working with various members of the School of Education, and leading a number of seminars. He presented at the first Wednesday Research Seminar in the School of Education, on 18 March, on the topic: 'What is educational research?'




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THE RIVERINA'S OWN

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University celebrates its finest
Charles Sturt University commenced a week of celebration yesterday with the first of several graduation ceremonies. Professor Wilfred Carr from the University of Sheffield in the United Kingdom kicked off the ceremonies with a thought-provoking address to a packed Joyes Hall.

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Picture: Les Smith



HEAD OF CAMPUS ANNOUNCES HIS RETIREMENT

Ideas start flowing for river precinct development

BIG RIVER PLANS

By **REBEKAH HOLLIDAY**
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THE Riverside precinct project is shaping up to be the biggest project ever undertaken in Wagga and the community has started to sit up and take notice.

The vision is to make Riverside the crowning jewel for the city of Wagga, opening up the mighty Murrumbidgee River to attract lucrative tourism dollars.

It's a vision which Wagga City Council has started to share with the people.

Yesterday, it hosted another public forum where 15 people took time out to help shape the city's future.

If it goes ahead, Riverside will stretch from the intersection of Tompson and Tarcutta streets along the western side of the Murrumbidgee, all the way to North Wagga Flats on the eastern side.

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ADOPTING AN EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY

The Occasional Address given by Wilfred Carr to participants in the Faculty of Education graduation ceremony, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia, April 1st, 2009.

I may be mistaken, but when the title of my talk was just announced I thought I heard something resembling a collective groan. 'Surely' I hear you ask, 'educational philosophy is a prime example of the kind of irrelevant theorising that should be limited to the point of exclusion by the coal face realities of working in a school.' 'Surely' I hear you thinking, 'teaching is going to give me enough problems without having to bother with something as abstract and academic as 'an educational philosophy'.

You may be surprised to know that, as somebody who works mainly at the philosophy end of the education business, I think that this kind of attitude contains more than a modicum of truth. But I also believe that it contributes to a widespread misunderstanding of what an educational philosophy is – a misunderstanding that has been around for a long time. Let me explain.

Imagine that you are a geography teacher and someone asks you why you are wasting so much time discussing environmental issues with your students. 'Why' they may ask 'aren't you spending that time teaching them basic geographical knowledge and skills - the kind of knowledge and skills they will need to pass their geography exams and that will be useful to them when they get a job?'

Or imagine that you are a primary teacher and you are asked why the five year olds you teach are wasting so much time playing. 'Why aren't you spending this time teaching them to read and write and rattle off their tables?'

Now when you try to answer these kind of 'why' questions you will sooner or later find yourself saying things like 'I want my students to become good human beings who care about the world in which they live,' or 'I want them to be able to think for themselves' or 'I believe that young children develop their ability to learn by engaging in creative play'. And if you are asked why your teaching needs to be based on these kinds of beliefs, you will, sooner or later, find yourself

explaining how your job is not just about filling your students' heads with information or getting them through their exams, Your profession is 'education' – your job is to educate – and these beliefs express what, as a professional educator, you believe education is all about. And if you are then asked why you hold the particular view of 'what education is' that you do, you will then start getting – well – 'philosophical'. You will start articulating and defending the 'educational philosophy' to which you, as a professional educator, subscribe.

So an educational philosophy is not some kind of dry academic theory which you can treat as an optional extra. It is not something that you learn 'in theory' and then apply 'in practice'. It is right there in your everyday practice and it is being 'adopted' and 'applied' every time you have to make a decision about what is the right thing – educationally the right thing – to do. It is at work when the primary teacher decides that it is right to let her children follow their interests rather than forcing them to rote learn or memorise the things we adults want them to learn. It is at work when the history teacher refuses to feed his students a diet of historical dates and events and insists instead that the educational purpose of history lies in its capacity to develop a critical understanding of our own contemporary culture and society. An educational philosophy is what gives teachers their sense of what it is educationally justifiable and worthwhile to do. It is what enables them to distinguish a good educational practice from one which is indifferent or bad. It is the rock on which their professional identity is built. Without an educational philosophy teachers may be held technically accountable for what they do but they could not be held morally or educationally answerable. Without an educational philosophy teachers' understanding of themselves as professional educators would disintegrate and disappear.

Of course, the educational philosophies underlying teachers' practices can and do vary. Some of you may be sympathetic to the kind of values and beliefs emanating from what are usually called 'progressive' educational philosophies and, if you are, you will probably favour 'child-centred' views of education, discovery methods of teaching and the idea of 'learning from experience'. Some of you may be committed to a more 'traditional' educational philosophy and stress the value of a subject-centred curriculum, instructional methods of teaching and the need to maintain standards of 'academic excellence'.

Of course, teachers' educational values and beliefs can rarely, if ever, be located within one or other of these educational philosophies and, in practice, they tend to merge and overlap. But the real problem you will face throughout your teaching career is not deciding which educational philosophy to adopt but the problem of implementing it in practice. The real problem now facing teachers is caused by the pressure and constraints that prevent them from acting educationally at all. For one of the characteristics of our modern society is its tendency to devalue – quite literally devalue – education: to see education not as the way in which we equip the next generation to create and live a worthwhile form of life or to make the world a better place, but as a kind of credit note, something to be cashed in at some later stage for something else. To some politicians, education is about raising the Gross National Product. To some employers it is about providing a well trained labour force. For many people, education is simply the means of acquiring qualifications, social status and a well paid job. And to those students who can pick up the rules of this game, 'being educated' soon becomes nothing other than a continuous process of acquiring these credit notes by gaining stars, points, marks, grades, certificates and diplomas that, at some distant time in the future, can be cashed in for something other than an education.

Because this credit-note view of education is now so widespread, the pressure on teachers to forego their responsibilities as professional educators is all but irresistible and even the most educationally committed teachers may, not wanting their children to come to grief, skip their education in order to ensure their market value. Teachers' educational philosophies – irrespective of whether they are 'progressive' or 'traditional' – do not fit well with this credit-note view of education. For the professional educator, education does not merely have a social utility or a productive usefulness. For the professional educator, to characterise education in these terms only succeeds in undermining and degrading it. It is above all because acting educationally is so often incompatible with the demands that our society now makes of its teachers, that adopting an educational philosophy is so difficult.

But there is a world of difference between doing something that is very difficult and doing something that doesn't make any educational or professional sense. Today you are not just graduating as qualified teachers. You are becoming members of the ancient and honourable profession of education. As a professional educator your job is – and will always be – to educate

your students. This is your mission. This is your task. Sooner or later it is more than likely that your commitment to this task will bring you into conflict with politicians, bureaucrats, employers and others who think that education is always a means to something other than education itself. At these moments, you will have to face a personal dilemma. Should I resist these pressures, remain committed to my educational mission, stay true to my educational philosophy and do what is right? Or should I settle for a quiet life, advance my prospects and leave the commitment to someone else?

The choice is yours and the choice you make will largely define your life as a professional educator. You are about to start your professional life as I am coming to the end of mine. And if my own personal experience is anything to go by, then, many years from now, when you too come to the end of your professional journey, you will discover what I have now discovered: that what gives you the greatest sense of satisfaction and pride will not be the times you were promoted, the number of students you got through their exams or the amount of money you earned. It will be knowing that when you were called on to stand up for the education of your students, you did what was right; you had the commitment and the conviction and the courage to keep true to your educational philosophy. The journey is now before you. Travel well and good luck.