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Bill Walker died in 1991 when he was 62, the age that I am now, so I’m very much inclined to think of him as cut off in his prime. Earlier generations than ours saw 62 years as nearly a lifespan – nearly three score and ten – not too bad an innings. My father, my grandfathers, their fathers – none of them lived to the age of 62, and this was not unusual for their generations. Now we see the death of a colleague or family member at age 62 as the untimely demise of someone in the fullness of their life and their productivity. Sixty-two is no longer the onset of a chill winter, but the late summer blossoming of our lives. In other words, we have ‘unlearned’ what it means to be 62.

We live in times in which unlearning has become as important as learning. Dan Pink has called these times the Conceptual Age, to distinguish them from the Knowledge/Information Age in which many of us were born and educated. Before the current Conceptual Age, the core business of learning was the routine accessing of information to solve routine problems, so there was real value in retaining and reusing the templates taught to us at schools and universities. What is different about the Conceptual Age is that it is characterised by new cultural forms and modes of consumption that require us to unlearn our Knowledge/Information Age habits to live well in our less predictable social world. The ‘correct’ way to write, for example, is no longer ‘correct’ if communicating by hypertext rather than by essay or letter. And who would bother with an essay or a letter or indeed a pen these days?

Whether or not we agree that the Conceptual Age, amounts to the first real generation gap since rock and roll, as Ken Robinson claims, it certainly makes unique demands of educators, just as it makes unique demands of the systems, strategies and sustainability of organisations. Foremost among these demands, according to innovation analyst Charlie Leadbeater, is to unlearn the idea that we are becoming a more knowledgeable society with each new generation. If knowing means being intimately familiar with the knowledge embedded in the technologies we use in our daily lives, then, Leadbeater says, we have never been more ignorant. He reminds us that our great grandparents had an intimate knowledge of the technologies around them, and had no problem with getting the butter churn to work or preventing the lamp from smoking. Few of us would know what to do if our mobile phones stopped functioning, just as few of us know what is ‘underneath’ or ‘behind’ the keys of our laptops. Nor, indeed, do many of us want to know. But this means that we are all very quickly reduced to the quill and the lamp if we lose our power sources or if our machines cease to function. This makes us much more vulnerable – as well as much more ignorant in relative terms – than our predecessors.

Leadbeater makes a further important point that turns our assumptions about the usefulness of knowledge itself on its head. It is not enough to acknowledge our ignorance about the knowledge embedded in the technologies we use – we need to put this ignorance to work – to make it useful – to provide opportunities for ourselves and others to live innovative and creative lives. For Leadbeater, it is our knowledge that stops us taking risks, not our ignorance. Unlearning the idea that 65 is the age of retirement – in other words, refusing to know this as a fact - creates a space for re-imagining what 65 might now connote.
So too, with terms like creativity and innovation. Having unlearned the idea that creativity is all about individual artistic genius, or the idea that innovation is all about flashes of insight and brilliant, original ideas – and re-learning innovation as error-welcoming and teaming and borrowing and looking sideways and backwards, we make it possible to imagine more of us being creative and innovative more of the time.

Just as we are coming to ‘unlearn’ what it means to be ‘of a certain age’, or to be creative or innovative, so too, I argue, we may benefit from unlearning what we have come to know as effective educational leadership. We live at a time of quietism in relation to educational debate, with consensus managed by policy experts who spare us the problem of thinking too deeply or too often. This became increasingly evident to me in the decade I spent as a teacher educator. Invariably, when I asked my students: “What is education for, and what are you for in education?”, I heard back the same cozy mantra “To raise students’ self-esteem and help them reach their full potential.” Consensus achieved. What could there be to argue about?

I have the same sense of disquiet when I see how questions around the nature and purposes of education in Australia have been cut down to a push and pull around National Curriculum, Naplan testing, the MySchool website and the likely impact of the Gonski Report. Australia is not alone in this. It is reflective of a more general mood in liberal Western politics to look to the opinion poll and the focus group both to set the course and to bear the weight of responsibility for decision-making. Where our political leaders conflate moral responsibility with giving offence to the fewest, then the best we can hope to achieve in education is what David Mulcahy calls “a high standard of standardness”.

So what might an educational leadership look like that aspires, as Bill Walker certainly did, to more than a ‘high standard of standardness’? This is the issue I want to explore further in what follows.

Leadership, according to philosopher John Armstrong, is where the intellectual action has moved in our times. In other words, Leadership has displaced the centrality of past preoccupations with meta-concepts like Equality, Reason, and Nature as a node for generating new knowledge in contemporary liberal thought. Given this, we might reasonably expect to see the sort of robust and vociferous debates around the nature and purposes of effective leadership that characterised the challenge of existentialism or postmodernism or postcolonialism or psychoanalysis or feminism to the Enlightenment project. We might expect this – and we might be disappointed.

A few years ago, I was one of about twenty participants in a program designed as professional development for the next generation of leaders in Australian universities. The first task given to us by the program facilitators was to answer the question “What are the attributes of an effective leader?” By the time it was my turn to speak, more than a dozen individuals had spoken, saying pretty much the same predictable things – an effective leader is a good communicator, a team-builder, well-organised, altruistic, empathic and so on – a sort of table manners, if you will, for behaving oneself at the top. No-one spoke of charisma or forcefulness, of course – we were all senior academics well-tutored enough in the politesse of contemporary power to stay away from anything that smacked of hierarchy or the cult of personality.
Like the responses of my student teachers, it was all just too pat. My ambivalence about the effortlessness of achieving such consensus – each participant nodding wholeheartedly at the offerings of the next – constrained me to name the historical reality. “The attributes of an effective leader, historically speaking”, I said, “involve being a man, sitting on a horse or elevated above the hoi polloi in some other appropriate fashion, brandishing a sword, sceptre or similar marker of power, being opulently attired and speaking in a loud voice.” It goes without saying that I was drawing on the historical narrative of the West – this is an image of leadership unrecognisable in our indigenous past.

As might be expected in a forum in which psychological discourse is the lingua franca, this caused more than a little mirth. It also pre-empted some throat-clearing on the part of the facilitators who professed the importance of adding an historical perspective to the ‘mix’, assuring all of us that we would come back to the issue of the horse etc – we never did – but for now we would move on to fill in a psychologically validated test instrument which might help us to identify our potential strengths and weaknesses as leaders (two separate lists of attributes) to begin our work on the latter. The horse, like the sceptre, was lost in the thicket of the dot-point discourse in which we would pretty much remain embedded for the rest of the week. It was only at the bar on the final night that one participant ventured: “Whatever happened to the horse?”

I am just finishing a book about the history of Brisbane Girls Grammar School, a project I have undertaken with great pleasure. The project has been generously supported by the School, and, moreover, there has been no pressure to airbrush the less-than-salubrious events and personalities that are inevitably part of the history of any educational organisation. The opportunity this project has given me to reflect on Queensland’s educational history has been salutary. I now see that debate in our present times has much less of the freshness and passion that characterised public debates among literate citizens of the past. A century ago, ‘the character and style of education best suited to the future’ was a topic that was daily fare in the Brisbane Courier, in the Parliament and in other public forums. Indeed, the second book ever published in Queensland was “A Lecture on National Education”, an indication of the widespread engagement of Queensland’s citizens with education for its own sake.

But even more importantly for my argument here, archival research at Brisbane Girls Grammar drew my attention to our proven capacity to unlearn a generation of educational leadership that was considered the gold standard only a few decades ago. The gold standard of effective leadership was the capacity to control and command from an elevated height, to exercise, in metaphorical terms, the power that came with the sceptre and the horse. It was a notion of effective educational leadership that lingered well into my own days as a young secondary school teacher.

The principalship of Miss Kathleen Lilley, Headmistress of Brisbane Girls Grammar for 27 years until her retirement in 1952, is a consummate exemplar of the successful performance of such ‘command and control’ leadership. The fact that she was “quite capable of reducing ‘erring’ staff to tears” and “on occasions ... even shouted at staff in front of students ... quite fail[ing] to respect their sensibilities when her temper was roused” would no longer be approved as effective (or indeed ethical) educational leadership. Yet the fact that Kathleen Lilley “never tolerated outside criticism of staff” either from parents or from elsewhere,
“including the Department of Public Instruction inspector” has been admired ever since as a measure of her leadership and her loyalty to the School, and is ritually given as a reason why so many of her staff remained so long as teachers at Girls Grammar. While Miss Lilley’s mixture of “benign paternalism and fearsome autocracy” would be impossible to endorse in any modern context of schooling, she is remembered by many past students with affection as well as awe, and her capacity to command and control was accepted, even admired, as appropriate for its times.

Times have changed, and, we would probably want to add, for the better. But before we rush to congratulate ourselves for putting an end to the control and command tyrannies of the past, we might spare a thought for what we have lost – as well as gained – in replacing ‘top-down’ leadership models with the consensus management models of our more ‘horizontal’ times. What enables also constrains. So any inclination to make two separate and distinct columns – with effective leadership dot-points in one and ineffective leadership dot-points in the other – is unlikely to be helpful for thinking about this question. Instead, we need to consider how a contemporary evaluation of Miss Lilley’s performance of educational leadership enables and constrains what we now say, think and do in the name of effective leadership.

To return to John Armstrong’s thesis, our current liberal notions of leadership, he argues, have restricted our collective capacity as leaders to move beyond consensus management – that is, to take the part of the truth that has been exposed to us and do something with it. Instead, we talk about leadership in ways that deny the fact that we are in part necessarily talking about being in charge, about owning the power to move from a lesser option to a better one. As liberal, democratic leaders, we have become uncomfortable with the idea of setting the direction towards good-and-important truths and away from lesser versions of truth. What right have I to set the course, to name the direction, to dictate to others where we should or should not be heading? We remain unconvinced that our personal intellectual and moral compass is more worthy than any other. This sense of unease – the liberal’s dilemma – is useful as a means of curbing tyranny, but it can also render contemporary ‘progressive’ leadership vulnerable – vulnerable to becoming a lesser version of itself. Perhaps overseeing the process of strategic planning - following best practice templates for quality assurance and risk management – this may be all that, as an ‘enlightened’ leader, I can and should seek to do.

There is no doubt about the importance of distrusting power more than we have done in the past. And there is no doubt that effective educators work with and for others rather than on them. As a first year teacher in 1969, I had a boss (as distinct from a principal or a manager or a leader) who was deeply offended when one of the student’s parents accused him of being a ‘petty tyrant’. ‘A tyrant I don’t mind”, he replied, “but a petty tyrant!!” And yet, and yet.

What do we make of the ‘petty tyrants’ who insisted that a naive farmer’s daughter go to Oxford at the turn of the twentieth century to embark on the sort of deeply fulfilling academic career that she could scarcely imagine:

Kathleen Byass would never have got anywhere near university had it not been for vigilant teachers throughout her school career. She was a farmer’s daughter, born in 1898, whose primary teacher insisted that instead of leaving with her friends at age eleven she should be sent to the local grammar school; her headmaster at the grammar school...recognizing Kathleen’s potential... suggested she try for Somerville
[at Oxford]. Kathleen had not heard of Somerville, and had no idea where Oxford was.... After a bewildering interview she was invited to sit at High Table with Miss Penrose, the Principal, and was terror-stricken on being asked: ‘and what are your feelings, Miss Byass, on the Turks’ reported treatment of Santa Sophia?’ Still, she got her university place.

I want to contrast Robinson’s account of Kathleen Byass with the reflections of Joel Meares, a Generation Y Australian, published in a leading Australian newspaper last year. He said of himself and his peers:

We were raised on a diet of constant reinforcement and told we could do anything. Keen to boost our self-esteem, Mum and Dad sacrificed their weekends to chauffeur us from soccer to ballet to drama to Nippers.... “Our teachers showered us with unjustifiable praise.... In kindergarten I won an award for tying my shoelaces a week later than everyone else; in year 7, I won a ribbon for not finishing a cross-country run.

What have we lost, and what have we gained? We would not choose bewilderment and ‘terror’ for those we educate. As educational leaders we have worked to unlearn the sort of tyrannies that convinced so many of our indigenous and other socially marginalised young people present and past that education is no place for them. But equally, we should not choose to supplant a ‘high threat’ educational culture with a ‘low challenge’ one. We should not accept the choice of either bullying or banality in the classroom. And nor should we be in the business of cutting down moral-ethical leadership to data-driven consensus management.

According to philosopher Michael Foley, we are currently seeing a retreat from difficulty in many aspects of our lives, and at the very time when the present and the future life has never been so complex. Foley understands the retreat from difficulty in living, learning and leading as an effect, at least in part, on our willingness to elevate individual ‘self-esteem’ as a social good worthy for its own sake, independent of personal or professional achievement. He understands self-esteem as having no values or principles, and as requiring no effort beyond insisting on positive self-reflection from others. Where self-esteem is elevated over self-management, then easy success rules over disciplined effort. Foley goes on to say that:

Difficulty has become repugnant because it denies entitlement, disenchants potential, limits mobility and flexibility, delays gratification, distracts from distraction and demands responsibility, commitment, attention and thought.

Whether or not we agree with Foley that ‘raising self-esteem’ is a project ripe for unlearning, there is little doubt that our present generation of young people, no matter how positive or otherwise they may feel about themselves as individuals, can anticipate a life in which economic instability and fragmentary social conditions will be the norm. According to sociologist Richard Sennett, this will demand of everyone a capacity to improvise a life-narrative without any sustained sense of self or continuous identity. It will mean paying constant attention to managing short-term relationships while migrating from place to place, job to job and task to task, re-developing new talents as economic and skilling demands shift. Simply put, it will mean a relentless challenge to unlearning and to re-learn.
In the Conceptual Age, Sennett reminds us, work culture is becoming less willing or able to reward craftsmanship – that is, to reward an individual’s talent for doing one thing extremely well. So hard-earned skills have an increasingly brief shelf-life, particularly in fields closely related to technology, sciences and advanced forms of manufacturing. Letting go of the past – in other words, *unlearning* twentieth century notions of expertise, work experience, career planning and vocational preparation – will be crucial to living, learning and earning well.

I recently had the good fortune to be part of The Innovate ZISThinkTank organised by the Zurich International School in Switzerland. It brought together experts from industry, anthropology, education and technology to focus on the question of whether schools as we know them will be needed in the year 2030. Among the participants were a number of impressive young people in their final year of schooling. It was clear that all of them were quite ambivalent about continuing their formal education, because they believed it might hamper the speed and excitement of their learning. “I know what is offered in the first year program at MIT”, one of them told me, “because I have already built it into the cultural products I am now working on with friends in Mexico City and Vancouver. And I don’t intend to waste years getting a degree when I could be getting on with the work I am really passionate about.”

At the same time that some young people are considering by-passing the traditional route to employability – that is, *unlearning* the university degree as the highest educational calling – burgeoning numbers of young people are increasingly desperate for some degree of stability and economic security in their lives. In Greece, in Spain, in Libya, in Syria, and in Australia’s indigenous communities in particular, many may never experience what it means to make the transition from formal learning to social security and meaningful employment.

What does it mean to be an educational leader of and for this entire generation of young people? National Curriculum, Naplan results, MySchool profiles and the funding models pre-empted in the Gonski Report are not unimportant in terms of this scenario but neither are they the main game. Bill Walker understood this. He knew the importance of sound and sustainable management practices in the work of educational leaders, but he was never confused about keeping educational leadership closely wedded to the most powerful philosophical questions about the nature and purposes of learning.

In the spirit of Bill Walker’s vision of educational leadership, then, I argue for an educational leadership that has ‘unlearned’ its earlier predilection for command and control, *and also* its more recent timid iterations - consensus-management and the straight-jacket of standardness. In a digital age, as communications analyst Feyi Akindoyeni points out, control of the opinions and behaviours of others is no longer an option. But we are also seeing the unintended effects of a notion of leadership where systems management and meeting KPIs has come to count as synonymous with leadership, rather than courage in open debate and the preparedness to defend important educational principles against the orthodoxy of the many as well as the opinions of powerful elites. Of course we would want efficient and effective organisational systems, but ‘what’s counted’ must not be the only logic that counts.

As Nelson Mandela reminds us, a good leader seeks opportunities for engaging frankly and thoroughly with others who are not of a like mind, knowing that at the end both sides will emerge closer and stronger. Had Mandela looked to appease the majority of South Africans
at the end of the Apartheid era, he would have played to their hatreds and fears, rather than asking enemies to forgive and to reconcile. His determination to set the moral compass above and against the popular mood was not born of arrogance or egotism, and nor was it based on empirical data provided by opinion polls or focus groups. The ‘data’ were against him, as were the vast majority of his people. Mandela’s insistence on reconciliation was neither tyranny nor timidity. It was an exercise of deeply intentional moral leadership.

The intentional leadership so desperately needed across all educational sectors is one which actively seeks out opportunities to chair and to challenge conversations, including controversial ones. It is a leadership with the necessary agility to adapt and adopt for the time and the place, while refusing the imperative either to command or to appease. It is a leadership that takes the moral compass out of the drawer of consensus management and places it squarely in the centre of the decision-making table.

Finally, then, it is not a matter of looking back nostalgically to the horse. Nor do we need to restore the leadership practices of the ‘cult of personality’ that was Miss Lilley’s badge of honour half a century ago. The imperative now is to set the moral compass away from falsity and towards important and powerful truths. At a time when every opinion on Twitter or Facebook may be argued to be as worthy as any other, and when the education project worldwide is being asked to ‘explain itself’ in terms of test scores, economic efficiency and risk minimisation, it is too easy to seek cover from the fullness of leadership responsibility by moving bones from one graveyard of strategic planning to another. It is time to unlearn leadership as either manic tyranny or moral timidity.
References


iv Ibid.


viii Ibid, page 74.

ix Ibid, page 74.


About Author:

Erica’s career has involved four decades as an Australian secondary teacher, teacher educator and writer, moving from two decades in the schooling sector to a professorial role as an educational leader in the Queensland University of Technology, Australia, and in Singapore at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang University. She is now a Fellow of the Australian Council of Educators and an Associate Fellow of the Australian Learning and Teaching Council.

She maintains a role as adjunct professor in the Creative Workforce 2.0 Research Program in the ARC’s Centre of Excellence for Creative Industries and Innovation at the Queensland University of Technology. Erica is actively involved in linking the work of the Program with professional learning in schools in Australia and globally. She was Brisbane Girls Grammar School Scholar in Residence in 2010 and their Writer in Residence in 2012. Her extensive research and scholarship is well known for its focus on:

(a) creative capacity building for 21st century living learning and earning

(b) shifting classroom pedagogy from Sage on the Stage and Guide on the Side to Meddler in the Middle.

Her latest sole-authored book, ‘The Creative Workforce: How to launch young people into high flying futures’, was published with UNSW Press in 2008. Erica is now an educational speaker and writer, liaising closely with a wide range of schools and professional educational associations.