

PERFORMANCE AND PASSION IN THE PROFESSIONS

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I extend my congratulations to those graduating today in Arts, Business, Education, Engineering and Surveying, and Sciences. It is a great occasion. My own graduation nearly 50 years ago was a great moment for me. I would like to share a few reflections on what I have learnt since that day and what I continue to learn as my professional career continues.

My theme is the importance of achieving a balance of performance and passion in the professions.

It seems that the fields in which we work, or are about to enter, are more concerned with performance than ever. Targets are set and outcomes reported in unrelenting fashion. Billions of dollars and the careers of thousands depend on performance. This is certainly the case in the field of education where these issues lie at centre stage in debates on policy and practice. Until Thursday this week, governments around the nation were locked in battle with the Australian Education Union on the latter's refusal to administer tests in the National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). There is unprecedented transparency in the performance of schools in the My School website. There are counterparts in every field in the professions.

The intentions are impeccable; it is the means that are so contentious.

We are committed in our company (Educational Transformations) to achieving a transformation in schools, which we define as significant, systematic and sustained change that secures success for all students in all settings. It is an outcome that has never been achieved in the history of education. It is a goal that has the deepest moral purpose.

When viewed in this context a focus on performance is entirely appropriate in a nation with the social and economic aspirations we hold in Australia. There is however a danger in Australia that there are harmful effects of current policy that may inhibit the achievement of important outcomes.

In an eloquent statement at the launch of the Schools First initiative in 2008, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Education Julia Gillard declared that 'All children have some gift and even some potential greatness within them. Finding that gift, nurturing it and bringing it to life is the responsibility of every single one of us'. Her words echo those of Sir Ken Robinson, who is a powerful advocate of an intensely personal approach to learning. Writing in *The Element* he stated that:

Education doesn't need to be reformed – it needs to be transformed. The key to this transformation is not to standardise education but to personalise it, to build achievement on discovering the individual talents of each child, to put

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students in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions. (Robinson, 2009, p. 238)

The title of Robinson's book (*The Element*) was chosen to reflect what should be a commitment to ensure that all students have an opportunity to be 'in their element'; that their interest, aptitudes and passions can be addressed and satisfied in opportunities provided in schools and other places of learning.

Robinson warns that the policy framework in England, now being replicated to a large extent in Australia, will impair the nurturing of the 'gift' and 'potential greatness' of which Gillard spoke:

Education is being strangled persistently by the culture of standardised testing. The irony is that these tests are not raising standards except in some very particular areas, and at the expense of most of what really matters in education. (Robinson, 2009, p. 249)

Robinson's fears are confirmed in the report of the Cambridge Primary Review on educational reforms in England. Many of the fears in Australia about the harmful effects of national testing, an excessive focus on and unrealistic expectations for standards, the narrowing of curriculum, and high levels of stress for students and teachers have been borne out in experience in England.

Speaking on trends in England in mid-October, the Archbishop of Canterbury stated that 'we have in the past few decades created an extraordinarily anxious and in many ways oppressive climate in education at every level in the search for proper accountability', adding that 'all of this gives a clear message about the priority of tightly measurable achievement over against personal or spiritual or emotional concerns' (Archbishop of Canterbury, 2009).

If there is one quality that is often missing in our current approaches and public discourse it is 'passion'. However, passion by itself may amount to nothing more than self-indulgence. There must be trust, and there must be a credible strategy driven by a compelling vision that has high moral purpose.

Loss of trust has been a key theme in discourse recent times (often in respect to political leaders) (Fukuyama, 1995; Covey, 2006). One of the world's high performing education systems is in Finland. Finland is a 'high trust' country as far as schools are concerned: there is a high level of trust to the extent that there are no national tests of student achievement and teachers and those who support them are able to use their professional judgement in approaches to learning and teaching. High levels of achievement for students have been an outcome of strategies that have been in place for several decades. In Finland, it seems that the whole community trusts its teachers and its schools.

It is a paradox that Australia may be moving to a more constraining, less creative and less innovative approach in education at the same time that world leaders in these fields are building their strengths, as evidenced in a recent report of *The Economist* (2009). In world rankings, Australia barely makes it into the top 20 innovative nations for the period 2004 to 2008. While all nations above us have a national curriculum, none have national tests or the equivalent of My School websites except for England (as part of the UK; Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales do not have these).

Nothing in the foregoing questions or challenges the importance of literacy and numeracy and raising levels of achievement in these areas. But it is striking that most

of those above Australia in the innovation rankings are ahead of us in literacy and numeracy.

The importance of creativity and innovation has been affirmed in the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (MCEETYA, 2008) and in two recent reports sponsored by Cisco (with extensive involvement of some of Australia's and the world's leading educational strategists. The first report on *Equipping Every Learner for the 21st Century* (Cisco, 2008) identified skills required by students in the 21st Century and an update was provided in its second report on *The Learning Society* (Cisco, 2010):

1. Gathering, synthesizing, and analysing information
2. Working autonomously to a high standard with minimal supervision
3. Leading other autonomous workers through influence
4. Being creative and turning that creativity into action
5. Thinking critically and asking the right questions
6. Striving to understand others' perspectives and to understand the entirety of an issue
7. Communicating effectively, often using technology
8. Working ethically, firmly based in both your own society and the planet as a whole (Cisco, 2010, p. 7)

However, the second report argued that *more* and *better* focused educational reforms need to be replaced to a large extent by *different* reforms. Simply providing more schools, more classes and more teachers will not meet the changing needs of learners, nor will the current preference for identifying 'best practice' and replicating it. It is time to be 'different' (Cisco, 2010, p. 21). Determining how best to be different will be a challenge to be addressed by today's graduates in education; indeed, in all professions.

Howard Gardner is well known to educators around the world for his landmark work on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). He suggests that the future demands five frames of thinking, and proposes *Five Minds for the Future* (Gardner, 2006) and these apply to each of the fields of today's graduates.

- The Disciplined Mind: employing the ways of thinking associated with the major scholarly disciplines and major professions.
- The Synthesising Mind: selecting crucial information from the copious amounts available; arraying that information in ways that make sense to self and others.
- The Creating Mind: going beyond existing knowledge and syntheses to pose new questions, offer new solutions, fashion works that stretch existing genres or configure new ones.
- The Respectful Mind: responds sympathetically and constructively to differences among individuals and among groups; seeking to understand and work with those who are different; extending beyond mere tolerance and political correctness.
- The Ethical Mind: abstracting crucial features of one's role at work and one's role as a citizen and acting consistently with those conceptualisations; striving toward good work and good citizenship (Gardner, 2006, pp. 154-158)

In summary I am calling for a better balance of performance and passion in the professions. As one who has worked in universities for more than three decades I affirm the role our institutions play in society and the economy. The iterative

relationship between research and teaching should provide a robust evidence base for graduates in the professions when it comes to the strategies and skills we employ. The same issues I have raised in the field of education are common to other professional fields. Our preoccupation with performance in an era of unprecedented transparency must not constrain a passion for our work or impair our capacity to be creative and innovative, which are of course the capacities that should be nurtured in universities.

Passion in Arts; passion in Business; passion in Education; passion in Engineering and Surveying; and passion in Sciences. Never lose the passion!

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