

Early Initiatives of the Australian College of Educators – Investigating Educational Television 1959–1964

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Television was introduced into Australia in September 1956 and just three years later the Headmasters' Conference of Australia asked the newly formed Australian College of Education (ACE – now known as the Australian College of Educators) 'to provide a report on and suggestions for the use of television in schools, including using closed circuit television'. The Australian College of Educators Official Archive (ACEOA) holds details of the action taken to answer this request.¹ The first of these is the series of letters written to such organisations as the Australian Broadcasting Control Board, the Commonwealth Office of Education, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) and the Victorian Council for Children's Films and Television to see what information might already be available both from overseas and within Australia.

The Broadcasting Control Board provided a bibliography of selected literature on educational television held in its library together with the invitation to the ACE to peruse whatever was of interest. It also presented a very detailed review of developments in the countries where a great deal of research and experimentation was being done – Canada, Great Britain and the USA – together with less detail of work in France, West Germany and Italy. As for Australia, it was pointed out that activities were brief as only the national stations in Sydney and Melbourne had made any serious attempt to test the potential of television for educational purposes. The reply from the ABC indicated that its intention was to extend the experimentation it was doing in Sydney and Melbourne to the other state capital cities from 1960 and also provided details of significant reports on the topic from overseas. It indicated, too, that the Directors of Education in Australia, acting as an Advisory Committee to the ABC, had recommended the setting up of a 'Working Party in School Television' to define the nature, scope and use of school television as applied to Australian conditions, a report on which was expected by mid-1961.

The Commonwealth Office of Education also provided a list of recent reports on both closed circuit and broadcast television for schools together with details of a significant address from the Australian viewpoint, *Television in our Schools*, given by the Director of Education in South Australia to the South Australian Institute of Teachers in May, 1959. Attention was also drawn to the research undertaken by the Nuffield Foundation that resulted in the publication by Oxford University Press of *Television and the Child*, which surveyed the effect of television viewing on children and which the Commonwealth Office regarded as 'certainly the most detailed and comprehensive report that has so far been produced on the subject'.

The Victorian Council for Children's Films and Television also took up the matter of the effect of viewing by adolescents, especially in relation to television crime drama. It drew attention to research being done in this area in Melbourne and pointed out that, although the official report was not yet published, the Melbourne press had already given publicity to the finding that constant viewing of crime drama produces 'callous indifference to the suffering of others'. The Council concluded by stating that:

We hope that the College of Education will find practical solutions for it in Australia, giving guidance to the many parents and youth leaders who are apprehensive about the cumulative effects of films depicting abnormal personalities, anti-social behaviour, hatred and cruelty.

So by the early 1960s the ACE had gathered a range of information that both reported on developments overseas and suggested the likely path that educational television might follow in Australia.

Dr J R Darling, founder and first president of the ACE from 1959 to 1963, was an ideal person to guide the College in how it might assist with the introduction of educational television as he had also been a member of the Broadcasting Control Board until his appointment as chair of the ABC in July 1961. The theme of the College's 1963 Annual Conference was *Educating For Tomorrow* and in his final Presidential Address Darling made a significant contribution in this regard by referring to what he saw as an immediate need for leadership and experimentation in 'modern means of communication' to meet expanding needs in education.² At the time Australia was moving towards providing for an educated democracy by increasing the length of compulsory schooling, extending both secondary and tertiary levels and, most importantly, preparing the teaching force's readiness for the task of educating for the future. These modern means of communication included radio and the television screen which he believed 'may have to be called in, either temporarily or permanently to meet an immediate, even if transitory crisis'.

Something of the general feeling about the use of television for educational purposes at this early stage of television in Australia can be gauged from his opinion that 'Such a suggestion fills the mind of the conventional teacher with horror'. However, he went on to allay this concern by saying that he himself had seen in many parts of the world, and heard of more, where much has already been achieved by such means 'possibly not better than it would have been by good individual teachers and plenty of them, but certainly better than it would have been achieved without them'. He pointed out that Australia, and many other countries, would soon be crying out for more and more teachers as no country was now prepared to live without the advantages of education, and concluded that:

In our part of the world it is going to be one of our major responsibilities to help them and, if speed is demanded as it surely is, then we shall have to make use of radio and television in the process.

Finally he stated his belief that leadership and experiment in this field was a clear duty for Australia and that he 'should like to see the College as well as the ABC involved'.

Darling completed his ACE presidential role in 1963 but he continued to provide leadership in educational television as Chair of the ABC. In 1964 he took up the challenge of what he saw as the future of educational television in a paper delivered to the South Australian Chapter of the ACE in April of that year. The College Archive has a précis of this particular address³, no doubt one that he gave to College members in a number of places elsewhere. In it he began by analysing the question 'What do we mean by Educational Television or Education in T.V.?', listing interpretations ranging from the enrichment of general public programs through to the addition of serious historical, scientific or aesthetic content to programs designed specifically for enriching school and tertiary courses. He saw all of these as the common responsibility of both the ABC and commercial networks. He also envisaged 'straight-out university and school courses, either designed for existing university

examinations or for credits which will be recognised by the university' together with 'Adult Education of a more deliberate sort, courses and series designed to instruct adults, but without "credit" attached to them'. It was this direct instructional aspect that he rated as 'the important subject for study' in the process of furthering educational television in Australia.

He continued by turning to overseas examples of such practices in operation and made a number of generalisations about what was occurring in educational television. These included early opposition from academics and teachers; an infinite variety of methods of making use of television; limited resources such as in the United States where the assistance of the Ford Foundation was an essential aspect of success; and the mistaken consideration of television as a complete alternative to orthodox teaching instead of seeing it as both assisting and enriching orthodox methods of teaching and learning. He also noted the valuable by-products of educational television such as being a stimulus to teachers, modelling teacher-training, as extension for parents and as a challenge to commercial television. Following these comments he made his own 'final and inclusive generalisation' at this early stage of the introduction of television in Australia:

It is unwise to make any generalisation about Educational Television. It must be directed, and is so used if you examine it, to meet special recognized educational problems in time and place. In accordance with its success in meeting these problems, it may extend its range or alter its function, or may be so successful as to make itself unnecessary, though with the continuing increase in population and in the demand for education this is unlikely.

Darling then described some of those recognised educational problems and how they were being met in various countries. In England he saw 'Educational Television – very good, what there is of it – but directed to supplement and enrich'. In contrast the USA had special characteristics of similarity to Australia – size and numbers, urgency of increase owing to the widening acceptance of the value of education, great diversity of operation as the result of national character and a system of local control, with the growth of educational television being partly a protest against unrestricted commercial television. Some 60 educational television stations provided a wide range of options – some owned and run by communities or universities and others funded by state education authorities – with all held together and helped to start and continue by what he termed 'N.E.T., behind which directly stands the Ford Foundation'.

In France he noted the special use being made to bring the culture of the cities to the large rural population, while in Italy the educational television system, Telescola, was being used to assist with two major problems: early drop out from school from age eleven and illiteracy in older people, especially women. In Japan television was being used to address several issues: to make teaching more effective in schools with limited budgets and very large classes; to promote the teaching of science and help overcome lack of facilities in this area; for in-service training for teachers; and to educate farmers, factory workers and young people needing such help. In Russia Darling saw educational television being used mostly for spreading technical and scientific knowledge.

In the next section of his paper, Darling looked at the application of a likely similar range of aspects to needs in Australia and the under-developed countries nearby. He listed among the educational needs the rapid increase in population, increased demand for higher education, a shortage of teachers, limited resources and particular needs in certain subjects. He also saw some likely local difficulties associated with

Australia's state-based organisation of education, the existence of a separate Catholic system, the independence of the universities and uncertainty at the time about the likely outcome of the Martin Commission on the future of tertiary education. Unfortunately none of these contentious issues is expanded upon in detail in the précis report of this talk so it is not possible to say whether he spoke briefly on each, or whether indeed he assumed that his audience was aware of what he meant.

From these problem areas he selected aspects of particular importance that he considered might be assisted by the use of television. These ranged from matriculation, the early years of tertiary study and the wider spread of technical colleges to the particular needs of subjects such as science and mathematics, the teaching of languages such as Russian, Indonesian, Chinese and Japanese and some aspects of adult education. In all of these the shortage of teachers was the most acute aspect and he saw that the provision of adequate educational channels could assist with this in particular by providing both enrichment of general school courses and direct instruction where needed.

He then turned to difficulties peculiar to Australia in ensuring an adequate provision of educational television. These included the lack of provision in the relevant Act for Educational Stations, while the decision to confine television to the VHF range restricted the number of stations available, leaving only one remaining station for use in the capital cities. In addition the parallel systems of national and commercial broadcasting tended to relieve the commercial stations of an obligation to do much in the way of educational provision. He then outlined particular difficulties facing the ABC, and of course himself 'in the awkward position of being, so to speak, a contender for a channel and the chairman anxious not to appear to be a pleader ... until he and the Commission have made up their minds'.

In addition the question of general television provision was a matter of government policy, with the Commonwealth Government needing to be careful of being regarded as interfering in a state-level field and, in any case, it was the function of the Broadcasting Control Board to advise the Minister of needs. All of these factors made for what Darling saw as 'some timidity' in any approach to extending educational television but nevertheless he went on to propose several possibilities.

One such proposal was for community stations in each state, governed and financed by a group representing the various bodies responsible for education, while another was for the ABC to be granted a second channel specifically for educational purposes. In the long run, however, Darling believed that the provision of a large number of UHF stations could allow for a very wide expansion of educational television with a range of adult education, school broadcasting, separate university and local stations across the country. While he saw the last option as being the proper solution, the present circumstances led him to believe that the current choice lay between community stations and the ABC only. Not surprisingly he then proceeded to outline why a second station for the ABC would be the better choice, both financially and administratively.

He then went on to indicate what a second channel might do, such as providing pre-breakfast and early evening sessions at university level together with day sessions for both instructional and enrichment courses for schools. For adult education the channel could provide instruction in a broader sense in the evenings in art, music, drama, literature and languages. He then added that none of this would detract from the possibility or desirability of closed circuit television for universities and schools as these would remain the responsibility of those in control of such institutions.

In his 1963 Presidential Address Darling had noted that one of the aims of the ACE was 'to undertake educational work of a national character either on its own initiative or when committed to us'. The Headmasters' Conference had committed the task of inquiring into and recommending on educational television to the College and Darling had, both as ACE President and later as Chair of the ABC, made a significant contribution to this matter of great national character. It is interesting after some 46 years to note his hopes for educational television and to reflect on what has occurred since that time. In that time, too, many ACE members have taken the initiative to investigate further and report on aspects of educational television so the role of the College in this national issue did not stop with Darling's departure.

Clearly Darling's work inspired others and the College Archive has, for example, a most interesting report from as early as 1965 of the Television Sub-committee of the Geelong Regional Group of the Victorian Chapter of the ACE into *The Televiewing Habits of Secondary School Children in Greater Geelong*.⁴ This report found the mean weekly viewing time of these children to be approximately twenty hours, but with extremes of up to fifty-five hours, and concluded that 'those who spend thirty-five hours or more being entertained by television are spending an inordinate weekly period in a static physical situation for entertainment', yet another interesting reflection point when considering concerns about television in 2010. Over the years, too, significant articles and research reports on educational television have appeared in *Unicorn*, the Bulletin of the ACE, and its successor publications.⁵

Darling's views were soon taken up by other educational leaders such as Professor P H Partridge who was the Buntine Orator at the 1966 ACE Annual Conference. A year earlier Partridge had told the Fifth National Conference of the Australian Association of Adult Education (AAAE), on *Adult Education and Television*, of 'the need for careful examination of new and diverse forms of adult education to meet the multiplicity of demands for knowledge at various levels', an examination which he went on to link with the part radio and television had to play in the dissemination of such knowledge.⁶

A further report on that conference indicates that the AAAE supported the creation of an educational television service similar to that being recommended at the time by the Advisory Committee on Educational Television Services that had been set up in 1964 by the Australian Broadcasting Control Board.⁷ Term of reference (V1) of this committee was 'to advise on the authority or authorities which should be responsible for the operation of educational television services' and the committee recommended that at least one VHF channel should be reserved for educational purposes in each television service area. It advocated also that 'an authority should be established to be responsible for the development and operation of a comprehensive instructional television service'.

However, to the disappointment of the AAAE, these recommendations were rejected by the Commonwealth Government, thus resulting in an assured role for the ABC, rather than a separate educational channel and authority, for educational television in Australia.

References and notes

Note: References such as 'Box 001-01' indicate File 1 in Box 001 of the College's archive.

- ¹ The letters requesting this information and the replies are in ACEOA Box 001-01.
- ² A copy of the address is in ACEOA Box 108-18 and the ACE publication containing other addresses from the 1963 Annual Conference is in ACEOA Box 100-(60-63).
- ³ A copy of this précis is in ACEOA Box 059-04.
- ⁴ ACEOA Box 316-17
- ⁵ These include, for example:
As though you taught them not - Some thoughts on the current role of educational broadcasting, by G W R Bunbury, *Unicorn*, March 1976, pp. 12-23; *Children and Television Violence - A Survey of the Literature*, by L Greagg, *Unicorn*, March 1977, pp. 62-68; *A New Idea: A Challenge to Australian Television*, by K Tindall, *Unicorn*, February, 1980, pp. 71-75.
The ACE Archive holds all copies of *Unicorn*.
- ⁶ ACEOA Box 102-18 contains all material relating to the 1965 AAE Conference.
- ⁷ This committee was chaired by Mr J W Weeden and the report is thus known as the 'Weeden Report'. Relevant extracts from it are to be found in ACEOA Box 102-18.

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