

# Overkill

Dennis Sleigh

I'm always amused by the tele-ad about lost socks. You know the one – someone comes in and wonders where socks go and then the suggestion is made that we need this multi-pocket bag which allows us to place each pair into a separate pocket before washing the lot, bag and all.

Don't get me wrong: I am in favour of practical ideas and I recognise that socks do get lost between the time when I take them off and when I don a new pair. However, I think of this idea as one of many where we are exposed to *overkill*. Just think about it for a while: why do socks get lost or mislaid? Because we fail to pair them up when we throw them into the washing machine or when we hang them on the line. If we only washed pairs, we could easily match them up as we hang them out to dry – and then we could roll them together when taking them from the line. The answer to lost socks: keep them in pairs in the first place. If you buy one of those sock pockets, you still have to do this – keep them in pairs – and presumably keep them that way until you roll them into pairs and put them in your sock drawer. In other words, you are adding an unnecessary step: you are placing them into pockets. By now – if you are still reading this article – you might wonder why I am going on about such a mundane point. My reason is this: today we are constantly seeing examples of overkill like this one.

## Testing, testing

Take testing, for example. Some politician decided a few years ago that he must know how our students were performing, so that he could boast about it at the next Premier's Conference or Heads of Government meeting. That sounds quite reasonable – after all, governments are always injecting massive amounts of tax-payer dollars into education and they should be able to find out whether the money is well spent. However, in seeking some simple and accurate results, the politicians and their ranks of bureaucrats went much too far. They over-killed testing and produced a new mini-industry of Naplanners – clever people who make lots of money by designing programs and books that will eventually help to invalidate the



tests that were first devised for simple information, as more and more of us are forced to “teach to the test”.

## Don't touch

Another example of overkill was the decision that teachers must adopt a “hands off” approach with students. The idea had merit – society wanted to ensure that any paedophiles in our ranks were not able to ply their ugly trade. However, it is one thing for a twisted person to grope a young student and traumatise them for life, and another for a teacher to be able to hug a sad child whose cat has just died, or to put a band-aid on the knee of a student who has fallen over and just wants a bit of TLC. The idea of a hands-off teacher is about as sound as an unarmed soldier or an irreligious clergyman.

## Administrative enthusiasm

Overkill reigns supreme in administration, too. Someone in an education office decided – quite rightly – that ideally every teacher is a teacher of English and that each of us should make an effort to enrich our students' use of their Mother Tongue. To make this policy practical

– a general aim shared by perhaps half of the policy-writing bureaucrats in our education offices – they then mandated compulsory training for all teachers in the teaching of English. Perhaps this too was a good idea – after all, a fair number of today's teachers seem to have been deprived of any serious study of English while they were at school. However, the inevitable consequence of the policy was that our “Let's Learn to Teach English” staff meetings were filled with Material Technology teachers who were struggling to get their students to hold a chisel correctly, advanced Maths teachers who were already frazzled by an overcrowded curriculum, and Music teachers who were wondering how to communicate their passion for music to a group of students reared on Retro Metal.

All of them might have agreed about the need to assist the English Department, but how many had time to implement these new skills? Despite the funding poured into whole-school literacy, the concept was stillborn, largely because of its being another case of overkill.

## Higher quals?

Still not convinced of this danger? Let's look at current suggestions that all teachers should have a Masters degree before they come into the classroom. I'm old enough to remember the two-year teacher training programs that equipped many Australian teachers to handle their classes of 40 and teach them well.

Then came the Martin Report in 1965 that told us that training was out, professional education was in. The old two-year course was replaced by one in which there was a much wider "educational" context, but probably a lowered "teaching" component. Even three year-trained teachers soon found they were underqualified and special courses were set up to give people their fourth year. There was a heavy dose of practicality in many of these courses, though I suspect it disappeared in the new and integrated four-year programs. However, this level of qualification has survived for over three decades until our recent decision to imitate certain overseas nations and impose further qualifications.

Where is the overkill in this? After all, surely we want our teachers to be well prepared for their profession? Yes indeed – but where is the evidence that "more" is "better". Personally, I would back a traditional two-year trainee from Wagga Teachers' College over many of my colleagues in postgraduate education with their double Masters degrees. The former might not be able to spell Vygotsky or pronounce Piaget but they could certainly enhance education in their over-crowded classrooms.

I am all in favour of improved qualifications if they really help make people better teachers, but I cannot see any magical connection between years of study and professional performance. In case that sounds like sour grapes, I should point out that my qualifications include three graduate diplomas and two Masters degrees!

## School funding

Educational funding is another place where overkill is obvious. We easily recognise as pointless the billions of dollars spent each year on armaments (after all, you can obliterate the whole world only once so why do some nations have the power to do that over and over again?) but I suppose that when it comes to educational funding, our viewpoint is, shall we say, less objective.

Again, I must state that I favour increased expenditure on schooling and I would also argue that a large proportion of that increase should be devoted to raising teachers' salaries so that they are appropriately paid for their work. I know as well as the next person that teachers work hard and contribute to society. That is why they deserve more money – to help them gain the status that seems to go with healthy pay slips. However, I cannot abide by the claim that the only way to get better educational standards is to increase expenditure.

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I am one of those who actually believes that the BER program was a very effective counter to the threat of the Global Financial Crisis, but it was also a carelessly handled process where millions of dollars were wasted, especially in some states. The benefits of the projects will be felt for many years in schools but if we are really honest, we might have to ask ourselves whether the money we helped spend was all necessary.

I was a principal in the Whitlam years when Karmel funds were injected into education, and I turned a blind eye to some of the wastage then (who needs eight overhead projectors in a four-teacher school?) but I also appreciated the fact that some equity was introduced into educational funding. I never expected a repeat performance, and I was as amazed as the next person when the Australian Government lavished huge amounts on primary education (at last!) in the Education Revolution. What a pity that there were apparently no accountability structures in place to ensure that the money was spent wisely.

The same argument could be raised about the proliferation of small independent schools under an earlier Government – schools that are now struggling to survive in a tightened economic climate. Spending money, whether it is for defence or transport or education, is a necessary role of government, but there is a real need today for a more balanced approach by consumers, and we must be ready to admit that we don't see endless funding as the basis for educational progress.

## Costly technology

My final area of concern when it comes to overkill is in the field of technology. Now, before you label me as a pensionable troglodyte, let me explain my concerns. I am all in favour of using modern technology, because I am convinced that it does help students achieve a number of worthy educational goals.

I saw recently where someone was critical of the in-word "engagement"; she argued that people were spending massive amounts on technology but when asked what they had gained, most reverted to a stock answer: it helps the students become engaged. To be honest, I am not at all happy with that answer; students gain many other benefits as well, but frankly, engagement to me is certainly a highly desirable product because without it, there will be very little learning.

My problem, however, does not lie there. I am more concerned at the perpetuation of the throw-away mentality that often accompanies technology. For me the last straw was when I set out to buy a new cartridge for my printer; I

discovered that I could get the new cartridge for \$86 or I could get a new – and much superior – printer for \$56. I asked the manager how he could do this and he shrugged his shoulders. He suggested that built-in obsolescence has taken on a new force these days with the advent of throw-away computers.

I was reminded of my experience some years earlier as a principal in Canberra. I had been dragged, more or less kicking and screaming, into the Technology Age and I had subsequently convinced the School Board to purchase a number of computers. These were being well used and I felt that we were getting our money's worth. However, after only a short time, some of my parents were concerned that we were being left behind in the provision of adequate equipment and they urged the Board to renew it all. The root of the problem was that some of my parents were working for Defence or for the Tax Office, two government departments that were less likely to face budget cuts than the rest of us. They were using the latest equipment at work and they felt we should too. Here is where I feel we were really going astray.

Not only were we being encouraged to waste the hard-earned money of our school community – how many cupcakes must you sell to purchase one state-of-the-art computer? – but we were also teaching a false set of values that urged schools to jettison what they had (although it was still very functional) and replace it with the latest and the greatest.

By all means let us use modern technology, but let us also use some restraint. Equipping a school with appropriate materials is important – but appropriate doesn't mean the latest things owned by the better-resourced school down the road. That is simply overkill, and serves no-one except the manufacturers and retailers.

The next time someone suggests a good idea, listen carefully and then judge whether its implementation is worthwhile, or whether it is simply another instance of someone trying to outdo their neighbours – in other words, resorting to overkill.

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