

Ruyton Girls' School
12 Selbourne Road
Kew
Victoria 3101

Principal: Mrs Carolyn Anderson

Contact person: Mrs Amanda Swaney, Director of Learning
sw@ruyton.vic.edu.au
Ph 039290 9334

Background information

Ruyton Girls' School was established by Mrs Charlotte Anderson in 1878 and is one of the oldest girls' schools in Melbourne. It is a non-denominational girls' school with classes from Kindergarten to Year 12. Academically, the students achieve at the higher end of the VCE scale and the school prides itself on its Year 11 and 12 results.

A most successful Years 11 and 12 the Co-ordinate program operates with Trinity Boys Grammar School, which is located five minutes from Ruyton. A combined timetable and school organisation enables students from both schools to undertake VCE subjects at the two campuses. In this way, a wider range of subject choices is available and a positive community relationship is fostered between the two schools.

The notebook programme is only one aspect of Learning Technologies at the School. Students use the Internet and an Intranet as a resource and there is a range of Year 9 and 10 Elective courses in which students can develop proficiency such as 'Computer Aided Design' and 'Desktop Publishing and Web Page Design'. While enabling students to become competent in a wide range of uses of Information and Communication Technologies, the personal notebook computer also serves as a learning environment. Students use their computers to receive information, research, plan, produce their work, and engage on-line with experts and other learners.

A strong focus on the pastoral side of schooling has led the school to place resourcing for wellbeing as a core in its provision. Two counsellors assist with the support of students, parents and staff, and an innovative Values program is in place in the transition stage of Year 7. The middle years are catered for in an extensive Elective program which has Year 9 and 10 working as a combined group. **Every student is required to study AC/DC What Power! (Active Citizenship/Democratic Choices) and the elective develops an appreciation of the rights and responsibilities Australians enjoy as members of both a democratic society and a dynamic community.**

Ruyton is a member of the GSV (Girls' Schools of Victoria) sporting association and has a very successful sporting program, particularly in the areas of Athletics, Hockey and Cross Country. It has won the Girls Schools of Victoria Cross Country championship for the last four years. Being a middle-sized school has enabled the Senior girls to work very effectively with their younger team members and the encouragement and coaching that ensues has built a culture and a physical profile that has encouraged the determination and persistence needed for continued success as a sportsperson.

Ruyton offers a variety of opportunities for international exchange. The Sister School network enables students to spend several weeks with their host family and attend their host school. Study tours to destinations such as New Caledonia, China and France are offered to our students. In 2006 students will travel to China to experience, at first hand, life in Chinese homes, guesthouses and schools.

At all stages, Ruyton works to make the learning of our students relevant and effective. The use of the scenario model to learn about the features and function of Parliamentary practice, as addressed in the accompanying article, was not only highly effective, but it engaged all learners in using their knowledge to represent their various parties and constituents. Such was the level of involvement that students were engaged in heated dialogue and lunchtime was spent preparing for the forthcoming debate.

For further information please e-mail the Director of Learning: Mrs Amanda Swaney
sw@ruyton.vic.edu.a
or Dean of Humanities: Ms Jenne Hale – jh@ruyton.vic.edu.au

In defence of scenario learning: Reflections on *Justicecountry* at Ruyton Girls' School.

In the current pedagogical orthodoxy, real world and deep problems are phrases often heard. I would suggest few teachers need convincing of the efficacy of practical approaches in engaging students and enhancing learning. This recognition has been accompanied by a proliferation of teaching that takes students into the community, getting them involved in practical activities as part of a real world experience.

My own experience is that, whether it is undertaking a letter writing or publicity campaign or taking students on an excursion to investigate their home city, attempts to make learning practical catch the imagination and attention of students, providing an understanding and experience that endures long beyond the end-of-subject test.

A recent experience reminded me, however, of the benefits of a different approach, that of scenario learning. The outcome of taking forty students and several staff and engaging them in an all-day scenario provided a number of specific educational outcomes that, I believe, would not have been as easily achieved using real world learning.

I would argue that scenario learning can be a useful tool to enhance students' critical thinking processes, not least because it allows the teacher (or instructor) to tailor the parameters of the experience to fit the context, including time limits and abilities of students. It allows students to experience real-life decision-making in the safety of the classroom, and with more immediate outcomes than are often available when students engage in real world learning.

In August 2005, educational consultant, Leo Keegan conducted his all day Social Justice scenario, *Justicecountry*, with a group of Year 10 and 11 Humanities students at Ruyton Girls' School. He commenced the day with a presentation on the disparities in the distribution of income and wealth, globally and within Australia, asking students to reflect on the sustainability of such an uneven distribution. He informed them that, for the remainder of the day, they would be given the opportunity to run a simulated version of Australia, called "Justicecountry". Working within the limitations of the parliamentary system, they would make their own decisions about income and wealth distribution. At the conclusion of the day, the state of "Justicecountry" would be entirely the product of their own efforts.

Students were then allocated randomly to electorates, based not on geographic areas but income distribution, each "electorate" representing one tenth (one decile) of Australia's population according to income distribution. Those students allocated to the electorate containing the bottom ten percent of Australia's income distribution were asked to imagine what life might be like for this group that receives one percent of the nation's income, an average of \$77 per person per week. Students allocated to the other end of the income distribution scale were asked to reflect on the lives of those in the top ten percent of Australia's income distribution, who receive thirty two percent of the nation's income and control fifty percent of the nation's wealth.

Students formed political parties or coalitions according to what they thought would be the shared interest of their allocated electorates, and elections were held, with

students taking seats in either the House of Representatives or the Senate. Using parliamentary rules and a Constitution resembling Australia's own, students were asked to "run the country", proposing and voting on bills.

The result was one of which every teacher dreams. Students took charge of proceedings, demonstrated a capacity for empathy and leadership and passionately argued their own position. Several students willingly sacrificed their lunchbreak to "horse trade" with their opponents to try and strike a better deal. During a party "caucus" discussing plans for a new income distribution bill, I overheard a student exclaim, "This is so exciting!" There were walkouts, accusations and frustration at the limitations of the political process; while one group felt they were offering a "fair compromise", their opponents were deeply offended by the apparent "tokenism" of the offer. As many of the supervising teachers observed, it closely resembled the real world of political decision-making!

Since the event I have had time to reflect on what it was about the experience of *Justicecountry*, and more generally scenario learning itself, that could lead to such an outcome.

The benefits of scenario learning

The ability of the teacher or instructor to set the parameters of activity is a particular strength of scenario learning. Scenario learning allows the "condensing down" and "chunking" of concepts that enhances student understanding by allowing them to engage with a real world problem in a way that is manageable and digestible at their level. In *Justicecountry*, this meant that students learnt about the Constitution and parliamentary process in a way that was applicable to the task at hand. And it seems to have had an effect. One participant observed that "I learn through thinking about actual experiences, watching and doing. I can now actually **visualize** how government works."

In addition, the limited time frame of *Justicecountry* meant that students could see actual outcomes at the conclusion of the day. This element makes the experience fundamentally different to other "real world" learning where the available resources and material may be above the level of students, and long delays may occur before outcomes are known.

Similarly, the immediacy of the experience, including the allocation of students to electorates with a vested interest in the outcome, enhanced the authenticity of the experience. In addition, the *Justicecountry* scenario allows for significant student autonomy; the outcome was theirs and theirs alone. As one student observed "I think that everyone who was involved had the opportunity to become really passionate about the issues we were facing, and it was great to feel that personal and group decisions could have a definite impact on the outcome of the day."

At Ruyton, the inclusion of students across two year levels allowed for a degree of cross year level involvement often precluded by the strictures of curriculum in secondary schooling. Of the two students who led the two political alliances (the Prime Minister and leader of the Opposition in the lower house), one was in Year 11 and one in Year 10.

For any student, being asked to take on and represent a position outside their own experience is a challenge, often requiring extensive imagination and empathy. For students at a school like Ruyton, being assigned to the lowest two or three deciles was a radical departure from anything they have ever experienced, or would be likely to experience. Simply exposing them to the information that ten percent of Australians live on \$77 per week gave them pause for thought, but asking them to make decisions based on what it would be like to live under those conditions was even more powerful. When asked "What have you learnt about yourself", one student answered "I am very privileged. Having been placed in the poorest electorate I now understand how easy I have had it and how hard others do."

The use of scenario learning like *Justicecountry* provides an activity that can engage students who have limited understanding of or interest in politics or academics. One supervising teacher observed that a student he had taught for much of the year had said more in the day than during the whole year to date in class!

Justicecountry in particular, and scenario learning in general, is an excellent way to promote Civics and Citizenship in schools. One of my favourite pieces of feedback from the day was an unsolicited letter that arrived in my pigeonhole several days after the event. Included with the effusive praise for the event was the following statement:

"I think some people may see AC/DC (our middle school civics subject) as a compulsory chore, so it was invaluable to have similar information presented in an interesting and interactive format."

In response to the question "What have you learnt about Australian society?" one student also observed: "Society is unfair but we can use the **democratic** system to change it."

Since Civics involves students learning about our political system, about rights and responsibilities as citizens and the working of government, along with decision-making and leadership, and Citizenship involves participation in and awareness of the benefits, privileges and responsibilities of community life, this example of scenario learning seems to me to exemplify the effective teaching of these objectives.

The scenario could, in fact, take the place of any formal lessons on Australia's political system and quite a good deal of any civics and citizenship subject. In a staff debriefing following the activity, Mr Keegan explained that he had initially developed *Justicecountry* as part of his regular teaching program, in the hope of inspiring interest in civic issues in a disengaged class of middle school students.

In the light of the current media debate about values in education, reading the student reflections I was reminded of the crucial link between values education and *Justicecountry*. The National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools, released in May by Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson, sets out nine values for Australian schooling: care and compassion; doing your best; fair go; freedom; honesty and trustworthiness; integrity; respect; responsibility; and understanding, tolerance and inclusion.

While these values may seem uncontroversial, debate has arisen about attempts to "impose values from above". A particular contribution of *Justicecountry* was its role in allowing students to come to their own conclusions about the values they hold as important, as evidenced in the following feedback. When asked: "What have you learnt about Australian society?", one student responded "The current (income) distribution is unfair to the disadvantaged; it is in need of reviewing. Too many live in poverty." In response to the question: "What sort of society do you want to live in?" one student answered: "One where help is given to the needy and the underprivileged; one which is more equal than the current one."

As a teacher, what I appreciated most about the day was the level of energy, enthusiasm and engagement. The benefits of this style of learning are encapsulated in a simple, yet inspiring, observation of a student who was asked what she had learnt about herself. She replied "I am more passionate than I thought." As a teacher, I felt like this student had been given a gift, an insight into herself that will, hopefully, stay with her for the rest of her life. That she may in fact be more passionate about issues than she ever knew was possible.

Timmee Grinham
Humanities Teacher & Co-ordinator of Sustainability
Ruyton Girls' School
Kew, Victoria

Article published in In Alliance: Journal of the Alliance of Girls' Schools, Vol 33, December 2005.