

CANDIRU

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Old News

It's Speer's Fault

On page 27 of the undated and unnumbered edition of *Synapse* which appeared in the November 1990 FAPA mailing, Jack Speer remarked: 'I might like to hear about school problems if you gave concrete examples of what you're talking about. Educators have a habit of speaking in abstractions. "the cost of establishing a situation in which the complaints would not arise".'

I wonder what I was referring to in the quoted section? I'll come back to it. But by a delightful coincidence I received the FAPA mailing on a day on which I had a brief exchange with our CEO. The context was a recent meeting he had had with someone jointly employed by our organisation and the three others primarily responsible for secondary education in South Australia at which lines of responsibility and reporting were discussed.

'Screw the bastard into the ground did you, Gary?' was about the way I phrased my question. The CEO grimaced: 'I wish you weren't quite so direct, John. We had a discussion which will lead to enhanced co-operation.'

'Ah,' I replied, 'you screwed the bastard into the ground.'

'Well, yes,' said Gary, 'I suppose there was an element of that in it.'

So I'm disappointed to discover from the learned Speer that I speak too abstractly. One possible reason for doing this is that the Australian education system at the senior high school level is so peculiar that only someone who has at least observed it could come to grips with some of the problems. My way of getting around this now will be to try to describe the fundamental ways in which the system is different from that operating (say) in the USA.

Even so, I'll have to switch out of my regular way of thinking for the current week, when I've been answering questions from distressed students or parents complaining about poor results received at the end of secondary schooling, for I have had to work hard to restrain myself from saying: 'has it ever occurred to you that you/your son/your daughter might be as thick as two planks?'

Whereas the English and North American education systems have had relatively little change in the last twenty years in the proportion of students completing(?) secondary education (with North America maintaining its high retention rate, and England only slightly increasing its low retention rate), Australia has encouraged a substantial growth in the retention rate to the end of

secondary schooling: from around 10% up to over 60%. During the same period the number of places available for students at university or college has only about doubled.

For about the last twelve years I've mostly worked in state bureaucracies which manage part of the transition from secondary to tertiary schooling. The fact that I've done so in two different states of Australia makes me unusual (more like unique, he added modestly...) but it doesn't actually broaden my experience in significant ways, since the various systems in the different states are very similar.

Thirty years ago there was very little pressure on the universities or colleges in terms of student numbers. In the 1950s access for students depended upon passing entrance examinations set by the universities (or more properly, in most Australian states in the 1950s, by the state university). If you passed the examinations you were admitted to the university.

The first difficulties with this system began to show up as soon there was more than one university in a state. Since most Australians who go on to tertiary study do so within their home state, while there was only one university per state what was learned 'pre-university' could be controlled by the examinations. But as soon as there were two universities within one state some negotiation over what should be set in the examinations became necessary.

In most states the universities set up boards controlled jointly by themselves to put into practice the resolution of those negotiations. Such boards - or more commonly their descendants - still exist in the 1990s.

It wasn't long after this that the first serious problems began for the universities. Previously each university could 'pass' just as many students as it wished - enough to fill the seats for first-year classes, for example, to pick a model out of the air.

But once there were more than two universities contending for students, this could no longer work. Each university wanted the better students, as well as the right number of students. And it quickly became clear that getting the right number of students was not easy.

One year in the middle 1960s in Victoria the examination in one subject (Chemistry) was much harder than in previous years, with the result that fewer students than usual 'passed'. This created a problem which spread throughout the University of Melbourne. Most students who took first year chemistry also took first year physics. Not only were there not enough students to fill the first year classes in chemistry, but the same thing happened in physics.

As Australian universities are funded by the Federal government on the basis of the number of students they have, this meant less funds, which would mean staff cuts. And this might very well go on because it looked as though there would be, as a flow-on, fewer chemistry and physics students in the second year classes the following year. Nothing makes a university move faster than the threat of a loss of funds.

The professor of Pure Mathematics at the University of Melbourne was therefore given the task of 'making it come out right'. This meant solving another problem as well.

The universities basically had, at this time (just after the second ones were built), a capacity which exceeded demand. It was relatively easy to negotiate who should get what fraction of the incoming students, but there still remained the question of which students will attend which university.

Initially this had been resolved by setting quotas for departments or faculties, and requiring students to indicate their preference for one faculty/university or another. Once a popular faculty was filled up, the remaining students could be off-loaded into the less popular faculty.

But looking at how what had happened in chemistry made some university staff begin to ask questions; if students were admitted to particular faculties or universities on the basis of their examination scores, and examinations could vary greatly in difficulty from one year to the next (as had happened in chemistry) then might there not be differences in difficulty between subjects within the same year?

The actual admission criterion had been the sum of the scores on the examinations the student had taken, but not all students studied the same subjects. That could mean that one student might be admitted simply because he (it was predominantly a male population then; it is now predominantly a female population) happened to choose subjects in which the examinations were easy.

Although the different faculties specified some pre-requisite subjects, they would never completely specify what a student must study, so this problem could not be resolved by a completely deterministic solution which wouldn't work for everyone anyway. (Most students completing secondary education in Australia take five subjects, each of which has about four class hours a week. The universities used to specify, at most, three of those subjects.)

And so the professor of Pure Mathematics was given a second task; while you're at it, work out some way to adjust the marks so that students can't gain an advantage by taking easy subjects.

Now problems somewhat like these are familiar ones in educational circles the world over. The Educational Testing Service in Princeton, which as part of its work prepares the SAT, probably has the greatest concentration of workers in this area (though ETS also has a somewhat exaggerated view of its own significance). But back in the 1960s we can be reasonably sure that Eric Love (for this was his name) was unaware of all that

stuff. And besides, his problem was slightly different.

What Eric actually did for a few years was sit down with all the numbers for the current year, compare them with the numbers for the previous years, and then make adjustments until everything seemed about right. Then he would ask the examiners whether they thought the figures were about right, and they would say 'yes, the figures look about right', and so it was good.

Then it began to get tough.

Firstly the number of students wanting to go to university increased because there had been a baby boom after WWII. That meant Eric had to handle more numbers. It was about time for computerisation. Secondly, the proportion of students staying on at school began to increase.

And now Eric found the task very difficult, because previously he had relied upon the student body being much the same as the previous year's, and it wasn't.

So how could you work out whether an examination was hard or easy? You wanted to do that because you wanted to be fair to all students. The answer devised by the universities has plagued education systems in Australia ever since.

The 'answer' creates problems because it seems in the minds of its devisers to address two questions; how do you select students fairly, and how do you make sure that examination results are equal. The 'answer' does neither of these things, but it appears to.

Selecting students fairly is very difficult indeed, if not impossible, so all the computational technique can do is try to produce an outcome which is fair collectively (i.e. there may be individual injustices, but there is no pattern of injustice). Almost all universities outside Australia have more enlightened selection policies, but for a long time in Australia selection has been on the sum of scores - no interviews, no other techniques. Thus for the last twenty or so years almost all students leaving secondary school and

wishing to continue their studies have been selected by computer.

The shift to computerised selection has at once concealed and at the same time made more seductive the second proposition implied by the questions; that you can make examinations results 'equal' in different subjects. What seems okay when you are talking about chemistry and physics with thousands of students taking both subjects may not be right when you are talking about dance and economics with only three students taking both subjects.

WAGGA WAGGA

Here's an instant report of a wonderful missed opportunity. It requires some explanation, because the average non-Australian cannot pronounce the name which stands at the head of this section, and is also the name of a smallish city/town in southern New South Wales.

Today, July 15 1991, there was a great deal of flooding in the area around and - let's be honest about it - through this tiny metropolis. The event was reported on the TV news for at least one of the Australian stations, and some spiteful script editor left in the statement that Wagga Wagga had been cut in two by flooding. The story went on to talk of North Wagga Wagga and South Wagga Wagga.

But no one laughed. I can't think why; I can almost hear John Bangsund laughing from around 500 kilometres. Can any non-Australian FAPA member explain why John Bangsund might be laughing?

Months later...

Since it is 'now' May 1992, some narrative concerning the effluxion of time may be appropriate.

When I started the 'Speer' piece I was working rather unhappily at the same place I had come to South Australia to 'enjoy'. In the previous six months my two closest friends here had gone to work overseas, one in London and one in The Gambia, and I had begun to look at options like that myself. Indeed, at the time I was writing the first pages of this issue my name was down to be a part of a British Council project to develop the educational system in Turkey (fortunately the British Council proposal lost - I wonder who won?).

I therefore started looking around for alternatives and, at about the same time, I had a day at work on which I felt really sick.

For so long as I can remember I have had only one chronic health condition - when a thunderstorm is approaching I get a headache which no medication can shift. As soon as the weather breaks the headache lifts and I am back to normal.

When the headache came on this time it was latish in the afternoon, so I took the notion to actually have the situation checked out by a doctor. Fortunately the local doctor could see me immediately, so I saw him while suffering.

What he discovered was that my blood pressure was somewhat elevated (around 165/145), and so, looking at this overweight male in his late forties (marginally true at the time), the doctor rubbed his hands in anticipation of another arteriosclerosis (etc) job. So he ordered a blood sample.

That was the first tip-off; my veins were so contracted that it was impossible to draw blood (others have found this in different circumstances). When I came back three days later it was still very difficult to take a sample.

But the following week, to the doctor's dismay, the analysis revealed perfectly okay blood with low cholesterol readings.

This left both the doctor and me no better off. My blood pressure had declined a little, but not back to its

normal level. His view was that I was going to get headaches whenever the weather was unpleasant but there was nothing he could do about it.

I wasn't wholly convinced that the weather conditions led directly to higher blood pressure and thence to the headache. But it was the best explanation I had heard.

But I resolved to do something about elevated blood pressure.

At this point my mother died. She had been declining for a year, and at the end of 1990 had looked very poorly. I had postponed talking to her for a few weeks while my blood pressure was up because I didn't think talking about that sort of thing would help her and then, after a quite active day, she died peacefully one night.

(This was the start of a run which, as I have pointed out to a few people, is the world's punishment on those who marry too frequently. In the next ten months both of my first wife's parents would die, as well as my second wife's father.)

It all seemed indicative of a change, so I looked at the job market (not good in Australia at the moment, and even worse in South Australia). I also took up running along the nearby riverbank.

Changes were made. By the end of June I was in a new job, I had lost a few kilos, and my blood pressure was down about fifteen points. When I revisited the doctor he was impressed. (Later in the year, when I had a return of the headache, and there was no sign of elevated blood pressure, the doctor and wrung our hands in frustration, but at mid-year all seemed spiffy.)

I attributed the drop in blood pressure to the new job. The job itself is supposed to be a high-pressure one, but I don't find it too much of a problem; it will be discussed later in these pages. But the new job is actually interesting - and I can buy just about whatever computer equipment I want. That I'll have to write about, I suppose.

But, to give you a hint about what I've been up to, let me note that I've had

invitations to work in Gambia, London, and Fiji so far this year.

Different Stuff!

CMC ReSearch Inc.

DiscPassage -- Search In Seconds

File: \DP\0385\03855.TXT

Sun Nov 24 13:19:42 1991

Database: The Complete Works of William Shakespeare: Queen's English

\$Unique_ID{SSP03855}

\$Title{Sonnets}

\$Author{Shakespeare, William}

\$Subject{}

\$Log{}

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The Complete Works of William Shakespeare

SONNETS

(written between

1595-1605)

TO THE ONLIE BEGETTER OF
THESE INSUING SONNETS
MR. W. H. ALL HAPPINESSE
AND THAT ETERNITIE
PROMISED BY
OUR EVER-LIVING POET
WISHETH
THE WELL-WISHING
ADVENTURER IN
SETTING
FORTH
T. T.

I.

FROM fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the ripper should by time decease,
His tender heir might bear his memory:
But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
Feed'st thy light'st flame with self-substantial fuel,
Making a famine where abundance lies,
Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel.
Thou that art now the world's fresh ornament
And only herald to the gaudy spring,
Within thine own bud buriest thy content
And, tender churl, makest waste in niggarding.
Pity the world, or else this glutton be,
To eat the world's due, by the grave and thee.

II.

WHEN forty winters shall besiege thy brow,
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,
Will be a tatter'd weed, of small worth held:
Then being ask'd where all thy beauty lies,
Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,
To say, within thine own deep-sunken eyes,
Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.
How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use,
If thou couldst answer 'This fair child of mine
Shall sum my count and make my old excuse,'
Proving his beauty by succession thine!
This were to be new made when thou art old,
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.

III.

LOOK in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
Now is the time that face should form another;
Whose fresh repair if now thou not renewest,
Thou dost beguile the world, unbless some mother.
For where is she so fair whose unear'd womb
Disdains the tillage of thy husbandry?
Or who is he so fond will be the tomb
Of his self-love, to stop posterity?
Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime:
So thou through windows of thine age shall see
Despite of wrinkles this thy golden time.
But if thou live, remember'd not to be,
Die single, and thine image dies with thee.

Er, About Those Pages..

Soon after moving to my new job I also moved into some technology I've been interested in for years - CD-ROM. Being impatient I couldn't wait for Australia to import these things, and wound up buying a CD-ROM drive direct for the USA, together with some sample CDs. Expensive hobby. Takes away a lot of fanning time!

CD-ROM is quite powerful stuff; even though I don't have expensive equipment, right now, while I'm tapping these words into a word-processor operating under Windows 3.1, I'm also using the computer to control the CD-ROM drive, which right now is functioning in audio mode and is reproducing a Charlie Parker CD quite satisfactorily, thank you. If I want to play a CD, or choose a track, I do so using the computer keyboard.

Of course, if I had a CD player out here where I'm working I could achieve much the same effect, except that I would have to use the player's controls - the computer still doesn't have a little robot arm which reaches out and changes the CD if I punch in the CD's name (but I could achieve the same effect if I had Pioneer's CD Jukebox).

But the power of the CD-ROM goes far beyond that (it would want to, for the price). So the foregoing pages are taken direct from a CD called (you've noticed?) *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. Quite apart from not having to type stuff out, you gain by being able to search directly for a particular quotation, and get it in context. I haven't got too many literary CDs like this - indeed, the only other one I have requires a generous meaning for 'literary' - it's a complete Sherlock Holmes.

But some of the other CD-ROMs I currently have can do much more.

Amongst text-only CD-ROMs are such items as *Front Page News* and *Magazine Rack*. The first of these takes press agency news releases them and

indexes them word by word. Want to look up a particular topic? Just choose your words and select a relevant reading. This is one of a hundred or so pieces which referred to Gambia from the 1990 edition.

#90287d3810.. 10/14/1990

French/German News Agency

LAGOS (OCT. 14) - Nigeria said Sunday it has decided to sell crude oil at concessionary rates to African nations in order to help them overcome the adverse effects of the Gulf crisis.

An official statement said President Ibrahim Babangida had directed the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation (Nnpc) to work out the modalities for implementing the incentive.

Since the Gulf crisis broke out, a number of African countries, including Ghana, Gambia, Togo and Benin, had approached Nigeria for necessary assistance in meeting their crude oil demands.

-30- 738

>>>>>>>>>>>>> FRONT-PAGE-NEWS(tm)_START/END_OF_ARTICLE<<<<<<<<<<<<<<

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Naturally you hope to find more interesting material than this!

Magazine Rack includes the contents of hundreds of magazines from 1990 (most of which you probably wouldn't want to read), again with fairly high-powered searching devices.

Then there are the CD-ROMs which are illustrated, or rely on their illustrations. I guess some of the simpler encyclopedias are like this. The one I have, an early electronic edition of Grolier's, is not nearly so sophisticated as the later versions (descriptions to follow), but it is mighty handy for getting quick access to encyclopedia-type information.

Then there are CD-ROMs which rely upon the illustrations they contain. Atlases, and the *Guinness Disk of Records*, would fall into this category.

But these are relatively uninteresting. *Voyage to the Planets*, on the other hand, which gives you the chance to manipulate Voyager images, is a very time-wasting activity. If I get the chance to waste the time, the back page of this edition will be taken from there. The difficulty, as you might imagine, is getting the right balance of black & white contrast for a laser printer, and in fact I was unable to get decent contrasts in time for this edition of *Candiru*.

Next step up are two of my favourite CD-ROMs - *Audobon's Birds of America* and *Audobon's Mammals of America*. Each of these includes Audobon's plates in reasonably high-quality versions (well, what do you expect on a computer screen?) but also, for some selected birds and mammals, the various sounds of the creatures. This integrated packaging works pretty well - and is very time-consuming.

Finally, in terms of current technology, you get the CD-ROMs with moving pictures. National Geographic's *Mammals* is in this category, but you have to like slow-motion movies because the data-transfer rate for CD-ROMs is not quite what is needed to produce normal speed movies. Of course, if you want to study how animals move you probably need a slow motion version anyway.

Of course, there are also games on CD-ROM, but I'm not about to spend any time on those.

And thus I spend my days, lost in an information junkie's heaven; with up to 600 megabytes on a single disk, at least it is easier to have access to all knowledge which, after all, may be found in fanzines, but it is not well indexed there!

APPROVED!

WORK
WORK
WORK

There's a lot of it going around. And in my case this has meant changing the place where I do it. When I write that 'there's a lot of work going round' I don't mean to imply, of course, that there's any great surplus of jobs, just plenty of work. In Australia, as elsewhere, the preferred distribution of economically productive work appears to be to concentrate the available work into as few hands as possible, rather than sharing the hours of work evenly throughout the population.

Anyway, in my case this has meant moving from a state-level organisation to a national one, as I sort of hinted above. But it's a different kind of job.

In Australia the largest component of post-school education is known as TAFE (Technical and Further Education). Each year there are about two million enrolments in courses managed through (or near...) the TAFE system.

Funding for this activity is shared between the Federal and State governments. Thus, when it comes working out what it all costs, and what the level of activity is, someone needs to add up the total effort. Since June 1991 that's been my job. It isn't all that easy, given that over 1000 teaching sites are involved. But it certainly fills in what used to be idle moments.

MAILING COMMENTS

These comments on the February 1992 mailing are the product of a hand which is a shade rusty. I hope that the appearance of this *Candiru* will be the first sign of renewed activity on my part.

OF MEMBERS AND 'ZINES

What a burden and reproach this publication is! Especially in the years when one has taken, well, a short break. There's also a finality here which a rebuke to failing memory.

FOR FAPA

Surely it isn't that hard to work out why the category of *victimless crime* exists? In the old days, when the legal system focussed its attention upon persons and not corporations, there was still such a thing as a crime against the state, even though most crimes could be defined in terms of the action of one person against another. A crime against the state does not have a specific victim. Nowadays, when the original notion of a crime against the state is perhaps a little old-fashioned, we could replace the old meaning with crimes against the collectivity - pollution, vandalism (by which I mean of course the economic vandalism which ruled western economies during the 1980s and still does in some places, etc.

HELEN'S FANTASIA

I don't understand why you feel that a requirement of 68 copies leads to a print run of 100. Do citizens of the United States count 1,2,3 and then at some point below 68 jump to 100? Can't a print shop cope with numbers like 68?

As it happens, I print 70 to allow spoils and then mail either 68 (4x17) or 69 (3x23) copies to the OE.

DEROGATORY REFERENCE

I had almost exactly the feelings you did about John Clute's review of the Panshin book - at first the thought that Clute was going to far, and then more or less upon turning the page discovering Panshin doing exactly what Clute had accused him of. But is this precognition?

HORIZONS

I'm not sure what *The Nova Mob* is like nowadays, but its Adelaide equivalent, *Critical Mass*, while sitting still for longish papers on writers and other obscure objects, does not, alas, remain silent. While the interjections are not as frequent as at LASFS meetings, they are not funny either, and are often along the lines of 'has anyone seen [obscure film] yet?' Very tedious - and indeed intolerable in reasonable company.

A PROPOS DE RIEN

I've read several of the books you note, but the best one to comment on is the Janette Turner Hospital (and not entirely because she is Australia/Canadian). She doesn't think of her work as science fiction (although her latest novel, *The Last Magician*, is set in a future of sorts), but she is certainly keen on the linguistic aspects of writing. JTH had a funny piece in an Australian newspaper about her struggles with editors in the US to ensure that her language was retained; the article focused upon 'gravel rash' which, it was editorially claimed, was an unknown phrase in the USA (any comments on that?). Recently she did a reading on national television here, and I was slightly surprised to notice that the move from conversation to reading was accompanied by a shift from Australian/Canadian to mid-Atlantic.

LICKS

Australia made major efforts in the 1980s (and it's a continuing task today) to catch up with the USA (and the UK) in the poverty stakes. It's doubtful that even a conservative government could have done better than our Labor one has. This has left the financially-challenged classes with a considerable problem when confronting the ballot box .

Although rugby isn't as important to me now as it was thirty years ago, I did enjoy watching New South Wales make a meal of Scotland yesterday.

THE ADVENTURES OF OZZIE OSBOURNE AND HARRIET

Despite the length of your argument about VCRs and their timers, I recall an article in *New Scientist* in 1991 which suggested that VCR controls were poorly and confusingly designed.

I find your comments on rugby confusing: how can you, as a New Zealander, suggest that rugby does not involve 'extreme physical contact'? For that matter, rugby players are increasingly wearing protective clothing. One of the best developments, he opined from his years of experience on the front row of scrums, is the practice of taping the ears back to the head so that they don't get ripped off so easily. You wouldn't notice this since you don't think there's extreme physical contact.

FAPA VENUS

Your earlier fanzines, as well as this one, remain some of the best argument for spirit duplicating around; any chance of returning to that primitive technology?

ANKUS

You mean you travelled all that distance across the Pacific to be kept in the dark?

A FANTASY READER'S GUIDE TO BRITAIN

What a useful document this is, although I would have thought that Henry James

would have qualified as an author to be included. Your note on Cheshire reminded me of Eric Bentscliffe's sad death earlier this year; Eric drove me to Alderley Edge and talked about its influence on Garner (since that's not the kind of geological formation we have much of in Australia I was more interested in that side of it, I admit).

DETOURS

Your highlighting of, and comment upon, Harry Warner Jr's comment notwithstanding, I think that the level of emceeing in FAPA is lower than I would have expected. When I look at the sort of material included by those who don't comment, FAPA may well be better off.

GLITZ

In general your comments on the expansion of fandom match my Australian experience. Twenty years ago in Australia a 'science fiction' convention would have stuff about books, films, comics and even science. But in the last decade the trend has been to specialisation and exclusion. It does raise the question of whether we any longer need a 'WorldCon' which tries to be everything to everybody. What we need is for 'fandom' to be balkanised formally. Dick Eney could help.

CATACHRESIS

Teaching languages other than English to children when young works better in some countries than others. And here is a place where non-English speakers have an advantage, since a fairly 'natural' second language to have is English. But what do you do in a country like Australia, where we already teach about 40 languages? (And that's not counting the various Aboriginal languages, although there's some movement in that direction now, I'm delighted to see.) 7 June 1992