On being international and the phenomenon of difference…

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In the first edition (10:1) of the relaunched journal in its new international format, editor Dr. Eddie Norman saluted the immense contributions of his predecessors Professor John Eggleston and Professor Richard Kimbell. He did so in the context of the continuity of the journal's antecedents and the 'seamless connections it has provided and advocated between theory and practice'. Addressing the question of 'Why international?', Norman recognised the need for any quality research journal to attract quality international researchers but he also highlighted the significance of 'taking an international and an inter-disciplinary perspective' to strengthening Design and Technology education's future.

From a different angle, it is also appropriate for the journal to take an international role because of its history and pedigree in curriculum leadership. The birth and growth of Design and Technology in the UK has been a remarkable phenomenon driven by dedicated practitioners. Design and Technology's life journey continues but remains, like any curriculum field, open to both challenges and opportunities. There are debates to engage with and the need for research is ever-present.

What, then, are some of the implications of 'going international'? This is not a question addressed solely to a readership that has been principally British because wherever we are in the world the question is relevant. By looking elsewhere we compare, we learn, and we improve our perspectives. It is all too easy to let our personal and local thinking inhibit alternative ways of seeing and doing things. It is important to develop further our global professional collegiality by developing our own (D&T) form of educational globalised thinking and discourse in order to critique curriculum possibilities – even if such critiquing serves to affirm how we go about our local work. Equally, sometimes we could learn from the experience of others and decide not to follow the same path.

It has been an interesting and educative journey to be Guest Editor of this Special Edition of the Journal and I'm grateful to the Editorial Board for the invitation to take up the role. The collection of contributions that has emerged from a range of invitations and submissions is, I believe, a rich one and is illustrative of the kinds of issues that colleagues will recognise as being simultaneously global in nature yet locally significant. I say 'emerged' because a quirk of circumstances has produced what might be called an Australian edition. But the fact that the principal authors are from one country becomes almost irrelevant as the articles are read. Here is a range of perspectives on a range of topics, all of which have some universal implications.

Across the international D&T community, just as there are different stories, different histories, different jurisdictions and different perspectives, the cautionary tale is about the phenomenon of difference.

L. P. Hartley, writing in the prologue of The Go-Between in 1953, said 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there'. Apart from its apparent message, such a statement can be deconstructed in several ways. It implies a singular past yet we might question whether there actually is such a readily universal entity. More relevant, is the 'othering' or distancing of the 'they' ie 'not me/us'. Also, his placing of a time as 'foreign' is used to literary effect in implying that foreign is necessarily different and, possibly, less palatable. In fact, exploring difference (as well as pasts or futures) can be enormously enriching.

To open up difference a little further, there is a maxim used in promoting cross-cultural and international understanding. It suggests that, rather than trying to abolish differences and respect frontiers, we might consider respecting differences and abolishing frontiers. From the journey of reviewing these (and other) papers

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for this edition, it seems to me that we may well find merit in this as an approach to some of our local and international curriculum challenges and opportunities. Let me give a few examples.

An obvious starting point is the example of jurisdictional boundaries. This is well illustrated by the states and territories within Australia (or the provinces of Canada or the states of the US) each with its own education system, history and pride of doing things 'our way'. Internationally, the picture is the same between countries. Yet for (D&)T education, it is not the boundaries that separate us but the practices that bring us together. The contexts of these practices are culturally and politically complex but the fact is that our international collegiality and discourse continues to develop new understandings that can inform our own local practices. Put another way, any jurisdiction or country that may think that it has 'got it right' so far as (D&)T education is concerned is probably missing the complexity of matters.

The bracketing, in the last paragraph, of 'D&' before the 'T' in 'D&T' is done because in many places the subject is not called D&T. In fact, it may not actually be a 'subject'. It may be a 'learning area' a 'field of learning' or whatever. The politics of nomenclature is rich and powerful and cannot be dismissed. When writing, whether of Design and Technology Education or Technology Education, do we try to use upper case 'D', 'T' and 'E'? I don't believe the field deserves less. In South Australia we had significant debates about the renaming of the learning area (more than one subject) from Technology Education to Design and Technology Education. There were many reasons in favour of the adding of design. None of them was to do with the existence of such an entity for three decades in another country. Each was for a sound educational reason – whether strategic or curricular. What we didn't predict was the jump we made from the bottom of the alphabetical list of eight to the top – until 'The Arts' dropped the 'The'. We're now second alphabetically!

Such frontiers are places for some interesting meetings. We might explore whether our nomenclature is a matter of establishing new frontiers or of opening new gateways. The discourses around just what is meant by such terms as 'technological capability', 'technological literacy' (see, e.g. Dakers, 2006), 'technicity' (Doyle, 2004), or 'technacy' (Seemann, in this edition) are testament to the complexity of the phenomenon that we, the profession are working with yet are still coming to terms with. We may at last be appreciating that any philosophy of the field has, so far, not had the exposure that it might warrant. But there have been some significant recent developments (see, e.g. Scharff & Dusek, 2003; Kaplan, 2004). In very rough terms, study of the phenomena of technology or design for their own sake ie in philosophical ways, have only been around for about a century. As long a period as this may seem, the true philosophical debates around the phenomena belong in the last few decades alone. While, in the UK for example, some see such debates as redundant, having 'worked through' some of them by now quite exhaustively, other jurisdictions (and theorists) which/who have not undertaken such a journey, are taking time to interrogate the kinds of premises on which established practices are based. The upshot is the exploration of new ways of addressing the phenomenon of the technological and designed world through new educational schema.

There are frontiers too that are thrown up by those who find common ground repugnant. Identity is to be established by saying what we most definitely are and what we most definitely are not. Thus 'the ac-prac divide' is seen by some not only as a given but also as a banner to establish polarised identity – "I'm a practitioner" or "I'm an academic". The truth is that, as this journal models, there is a critical interplay between quality practice and quality research. One is nothing without the other. There has been much talk of reflective practice over the last two decades and all colleagues benefit from this. Meanwhile, a colleague of mine reminds us that 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory'. Practice matters

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and theory matters and research matters. None of these is a country isolated by frontiers from the others.

There is also an interesting phenomenon that occurs when systems manage to generate boundaries between and across the interest groups they seek to serve. Primary amongst such groups one might expect to find the students. However, the interests of society, the market, employers, teachers, academics, policymakers and, significantly, politicians all manage to get some voice in the play (Layton, 1994). There are indeed differences aplenty here and the resolution of the competing interests in the best interest of students is arguably the most important challenge that we, collectively, can take up.

It is Design and Technology's lot that, as a curriculum entity capable of playing a key role in a 21st century education, it remains subject to numerous possible interpretations of how it should be constituted. As a selection of literature to illustrate this, the articles in this edition are good examples. They give common expression to what (Design and) Technology Education might be yet there are palpable differences between them in their bids for attention. Whilst it may seem obvious to some just what we mean by D&T, to construct the entity as skilling, or vocationalism, or enterprise, or environmentalism, or as market delivery, or enlightenment, or existential education, or whatever, is to be in danger of establishing frontiers of exclusion.

Indeed, one of our common interests as D&T professionals connected internationally is to understand the ways in which we can find some settlement (out of the current curriculum dialectic?) of having a clear 'subject' identity while also serving all students through their general education. I would argue that we have much to offer here but I know that many see things otherwise. To establish the identity of our 'subject' (remembering that the term may not have currency in some jurisdictions) by prescribing strict epistemological or practice boundaries may not be helpful in the longer term.

The issues around the matter of D&T as generalist or specialist education are not about polarity, about an 'either-or'. If 'Design and Technology' is a compound noun having greater valency than the sum of its parts it is so because it also espouses something of a holism, an integration. While politicians will wax lyrical about skills, innovation, markets, creativity, competition, sustainability and whatever else, it is the profession which, believe it or not, can do much to shape the settlement. Such a resolution will not be about casting curriculum specifications in concrete. It will be about reflecting (on) and celebrating local, national and international D&T discourses of difference. This is a global educational approach to narrow economic globalisation.

Here, each of design and technology, as phenomena in themselves must be recognised for their intangibility, their fluidity, their human-shaping nature and their definition-defiance. This – their slippery resistance to tight framing – is their very 21st century educational strength. This is difference at its most meaningful and helpful – when (to apply a recent education conference by-line) the blurring of the boundaries helps to sharpen the focus.

Education in many countries has never been so explicitly politicised as it is now. In such times we need, as a minimum, to be politically aware and to know our curriculum strengths and weaknesses. We can be positioned – shaped by default by the assertion of other fields and persons – or we can assert, informed by international best practice, the reasoned case for Design and Technology's place in the education of every child on the planet – they are, after all, the users of designs and technologies. Designs, designing, design practice and technologies dissolved frontiers a long time ago. Why not Design and Technology curriculum too?

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