

Opening Pandora's Box

(keynote)

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Educator

Thank you for inviting me to be your guest this evening and to talk with you over dinner. I hope you have a rewarding time at the 2001 AVETRA Conference. 'Research to Reality: Putting VET Research to Work'.

The topics which caught my eye were:

- forming and fostering research partnerships
- lifelong learning
- research for quality improvement, and
- identifying NEW research directions.

It would appear that the outcomes of this conference invite change. I applaud that. However, I need not tell you that change is always accompanied by fear and fear has a habit of closing the lid on change. Is the devil you know better than the one you don't know? The only reality in such thinking is that if fear wins and the lid on change is closed, noone ever gets to know or experience the possibilities that could have been.

I do not know enough about education to comment on the adequacy of my own. I am here now and I experience what I now experience having come through it. But given more recent experience about which I will later touch upon, my mind races at the possibilities were I to have been educated in a different way.

Education is such an important thing and many wish that if only they had that little bit more education, this or that might have happened. Take the story of the two Australians looking for work in London. They saw an advert for two footmen which said, 'References essential'. Showing some ingenuity, Bruce said, 'Right, I'll write you a reference and you write one for me'. And so they arrived for their interview and offered the Duchess their glowing references. 'First', she said, 'Formal wear here means wearing kilts, so down with your trousers and let me see your knees'. A little surprised, the Aussies dropped their trousers. The Duchess gave a nod of approval and said, 'OK, now let me see those testimonials'. Well, after being thrown off the property, Bruce said to his mate, 'With a little more education, we would have got that job'. I digress.

One clear recollection of early school for me was watching a friend of mine climb a tree and refuse to come down until his parents were called to the school. He'd been dressed in a pinafore and had a ribbon tied in his hair as punishment for bad behaviour. He was always a trouble maker and regarded as not being very bright. When I reflect on his protest today, I think of how intelligent it was for an eight year-old. What were the possibilities for a mind such as his, particularly in circumstances where educators were trained to observe the value of such a response?

I learned my times tables backwards and sideways and every which way in year 5. Did I know why I was doing this? No, but I did it. It was the practice of our maths teacher to call every student with a wrong answer to stand out the front to await a mass caning. The only person not caned each day was the last one remaining in the body of the classroom who had survived. Some students simply went out the front before they were called to answer. The teacher never looked upon this as an intelligent response to a futile exercise.

One student, when asked 'How many months in the year have 28 days?' replied 'They all do!' I could never understand why he got detention for trying to be smart. At twelve I undertook a vocational guidance test and interview, arranged through the Catholic school I attended. I lost sleep over the fact that all indicators suggested I was going to be a priest. Finally, the parish priest let me off the hook and said I would know my calling and he didn't think it was the priesthood for me. Nonetheless as an outcome of that meeting, I did end up as an altar boy. Somehow, advice often carries with it a bias or attached agenda. His advice relieved me, but I continued for the next year or so expecting to hear a voice in a deep and echoing tone say: 'It's time'. Eventually I did hear that voice but it was not from God, but rather Gough (as in Whitlam).

Even my University days were perplexing for me. It was not until years later, I was able to understand why I did not feel comfortable doing what I was doing. Now I look back and I beg the question why noone saw or understood the direction my life seemed to be taking from almost its inception.

From about age three, I sang. I've always sung. My brother always wanted to go outside in 40-degree heat to play cricket. He would have to drag me off the cool laundry floor where I would lay for hours humming and feeling and listening to the resonation of my body. At the age of 10 or so, I entered myself in talent quests and wrote to TV stations and sang on them. At 12 I was singing in children's opera and by 16 I had started my own rock band, buying my first microphone and PA system with money I had earned from singing.

So, surpass surprise, I decided to be a musician. But I was distracted by the system into believing there was no security in being a musician. I was not encouraged to believe in myself or to follow my instincts. On the contrary, I was encouraged to be monetarily secure. The fear of security closed the lid tight and I became someone I was not.

I failed three of my four subjects in first-year Law. I spent hours in the library researching old cases and creating wonderful points for discussion and argument. Oh no no no! If I wanted to pass, this extra search for knowledge must stop. Go to the tutorials and give back to the examiners what you learn in the tutes. I therefore learned how to pass exams at university, and upon leaving the system I learned how to be a lawyer from real-world experience, where my research methods from my first year became invaluable to me.

In spite of considerable success as a lawyer, the desire to sing was always tearing away at me. The advice from the old priest had been right. The call had been coming loud and clear, but I had been too distracted by the 'well meaning' to hear or

recognise the call. I ultimately listened to the call, sold my share in my legal practise and went to live in Vienna where I studied voice and drama, and ultimately sang in Europe and America before returning to Australia to have a family and continue an international career from here.

This history emphasises my personal experience. However, my story is not unique. The number of people working in environments not true to their calling is alarming. Their stories are similar and differ only to the extent that they have still yet to open the lid to the possibilities to be explored in their own lives.

In Vienna I went through yet another teaching process as a student of voice in a language I had to quickly learn, because my teacher did not speak English. It was through this experience that I developed the philosophy I now practise as an aid to singers who seek my assistance. My opening statement to them all, is 'I am not your teacher, you are your own teacher'.

Before I speak about that philosophy, I want to turn to the topic I came up with for this chat with you this evening: 'Opening Pandora's Box'.

There are two versions of the Pandora myth. In the first, Pandora was given a jar by Zeus and told not to open it. Curiosity got the better of her and on opening it, all the evils and ills of the world escaped. She tried to put back the lid, but only hope remained. In the second version, Zeus gives Pandora a box containing marriage presents. Being curious, she opened it and all its blessings flew out of it, leaving hope behind.

Guess which version I prefer.

Nowadays, the mention of Pandora's box is synonymous with fear. 'Oh, don't do that, you'll be opening Pandora's Box'. The decision to go to Europe seemed so right for me, yet at the time it was a frightening thing to do and was met with much opposition.

It was not easy to open my Pandora's box. Everything I had been taught distracted me from opening the lid. It would have been easier then to stay a lawyer. Everything I knew, as distinct from what I had been taught, told me to listen to my calling and silence the distractions. I owe a great debt of gratitude to my wife, who was willing to open Pandora's box with me. That experience taught us both that the lid on Pandora's box can be opened more than once and it is one lid we try to leave open.

I continue to perform as a singer, but many other possibilities have come my way in writing, producing and directing and other interesting opportunities.

Under the tutelage of the Maestro in Vienna, I quickly discovered that the initial difficulty I faced because of language was in fact my biggest asset. On the one hand, one could say I had a learning disability. In those circumstances I developed a process not of learning how to sing, but rather I learned how to learn how to sing - and there is a big difference. My learning disability was a gift.

I now consciously bring this way of thinking to people who seek my assistance with singing. I avoid the usual terminology of voice teaching. I concentrate on bringing

the singer to the experience of their voice, rather than give them the physical description of how things work. Their experience is their greatest learning tool. The process is slow at first but like the tortoise, ultimately gets there sooner.

Der Meistersinger

This aria from Wagner's Die Meistersinger von Neurenberg goes on with many more descriptive terms for singing colours and styles - another three or four minutes in fact. No wonder young David the student was having trouble becoming a master singer himself. It is a lovely piece and a lovely role. David tells Walther about all the different tones to be learnt and the timing and phrasing and breathing and so on and so on ... But how distracting this approach to learning becomes. No wonder Walther throws his hands in the air in despair. With so much information - or, what is commonly called data being offered - how can Walther the student really get in touch with experiencing the knowledge of singing himself? Without self-experience, the student is limited to receiving data without experiencing it. To fully understand the data, doesn't the student need to experience what the author of the data has experienced?

Da Vinci wrote and sketched ideas that were not influenced by data already written but came from pure thought. Many others have done the same. Mozart was a prime example. Yet, students who are caught daydreaming get detention.

In today's environment, pure knowledge and new thought is drowned out by the noise of our own existence, and the generations currently being taught rely heavily on past knowledge. Is there any real point in educating by using more of the same data, or should we as educators be searching for the window of opportunity which might just encourage someone to open their own Pandora's box?

Might teachers and teaching systems be better served through guidance - as distinct from instruction, or enlightenment through mentoring - as distinct from lecturing. Let us not forget that the power of learning rests not with the teacher or the structures we have set up in education systems - with their order of chancellors and vice chancellors and senior and junior lecturers and professors and teachers - to mention a few ... and heaven help me if I got them out of order, which I know I did. The true power of learning rests with the students. The real power of the teacher is to get out of the students' way, having invited them and guided them along the path to their own power.

I would invite all teachers to contemplate that the knowledge held by each of their students is as much if not more than their own. The young never cease to amaze me with their freshness and new ideas. It does sadden me to see them incrementally lose this with each passing year of their formal training. Is not the true duty of the true teacher to assist students to open the door to their own knowledge?

Existing knowledge has its place, but mentoring or guiding the next generations to experience their own knowledge has a truer ring to my ears. One needs to assess what part of the curriculum is essential to meet the practicalities of life today. I mean, what is important and what is not?

There is the story of the school inspector who went to a school to inspect the level of education. His first question was, 'Who knocked down the walls at Jericho?' Met by silence and nervous shifting of seats, the inspector pointed to Johnny. 'Can't you tell me?' 'It wasn't me, honest sir!' came the reply. Upon referring this inadequacy to the headmaster, the headmaster said 'What a scally wag, I bet it was him'. To protect his position, the inspector reported this to the parents and friends president, who said 'Well, little Johnny comes from a good family, so take it from me, if he says he didn't knock them down, then he's bloody well telling the truth'. To get some satisfaction, the inspector reported the matter to the Education Department and received this reply: 'With regard to your letter, we must inform you that this is not a matter for this department. We suggest you contact the minister for works'.

Sorry, I digress ... but what is and what is not important?

In Vienna, I learned in a very different way. It is not easy to explain, but in relation to my singing, I came to experience what I can only describe as seeing without my eyes and hearing without my ears. The more I tried through conscious thought to repeat what the maestro showed me, the more difficult it was to find a free and natural resonance. If, however, I effectively became what the maestro showed me, by simply thinking it, then my body responded to the thought - and in a strange way, I was able to observe, through awareness and understanding, what my body did in response to the thought. I came to know and experience and understand what the maestro was offering me. And so, the maestro became in a sense my reference book, and I became my own teacher.

Earlier, I mentioned outcomes to the conference, in particular in relation to research. Recently I have undertaken some research on dyslexia to help a family member. This research reveals conflicting approaches to what the community sees predominantly as a learning disability. Medicos have developed their own practices and policies on dealing with 'the problem'. My research indicates that the education system has never catered, nor does it now cater, appropriately for dyslexics and students with conditions which hinder their learning in the conventional sense.

The interesting thing is, that despite the lack of understanding of this condition and the limited ability on our part to help these students, many of them become very high achievers and still get through the education system. Their experience has similarities in some minor respects to my own learning experience in Vienna. From that experience I pose the question: are these students disabled or do they actually have a gift and hold a key to higher learning? They do it without or in spite of the formal system of education.

Research into how these students learn to learn may be a worthy new research direction for educators in partnership with the medical profession. If they have been able to individually devise ways of self-learning to cope with the system on offer, then the way they achieve this phenomena is worth exploring not only for their benefit but for everyone's benefit.

Albert Einstein, himself a dyslexic, said 'Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds'.

Pandora's box with the lid shut is mediocrity. By opening the box for ourselves and others, we at the very least release the potential of exciting discoveries in understanding.

So as educators who influence the future through the millions affected by your direction and guidance, I invite you to open Pandora's box through your research, and create the potential for change and new thought to carry us through this millennium and beyond.

Biography/contact details

Brian Gilbertson was a partner in an Adelaide legal firm for seven years. He had a passion for performance from an early age and, after selling his legal practice, went to study voice in Vienna. Since that time he has enjoyed a successful international career as a performer in opera, concerts, as a recording artist and in the musical theatre. He is also asked to give master classes around the world to pass on his experience to younger aspiring singers. He is, in every sense of the word, an educator.

Brian's voice welcomed the Olympic torch to Victoria Square in Adelaide on its epic journey around Australia. The song 'United in one dream' was selected to be performed at the lighting of the Adelaide City cauldron.

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