

## Preserving knowledge

Gary Ireland

When I commenced teaching in 1963, even in high schools a great deal of class activities involved reading aloud, rote learning and copying from the board – teaching methods often decried by modern educationists as *chalk and talk*. I have always thought it more than a little bit rich that teachers with ready access to a laser printer attached to a computer which could download from the internet even the most arcane items of learning should sneer at their humble predecessors who lacked these advantages. For that matter, I have never believed that I was massively educationally disadvantaged or suffered psychologically from being required to learn by heart the coastal rivers of New South Wales from north to south, or being equipped to tot up an account in Bunnings before the checkout attendant could work it out on a calculator.

The simple fact is that, because of the paucity of means of preserving information, teachers needed to imprint on the minds of their pupils certain basic facts and equip them to copy down from the board reasonably accurate and legible notes which could be referred to when exam time came around, perhaps several months later. That is why God created chalk and black boards.

There were textbooks, of course, often so old as to contain out-of-date information which required correction in class notes. Also, from slightly before the time my teaching career began, there was introduced for some fortunate schools two simple printing machines, the Banda and the Gestetner. It is not entirely unfair to say that if God created chalk, the Banda and the Gestetner were instruments of the Devil, designed to produce in teachers high levels of frustration, resulting in displays of temper or floods of bad language.

The Banda was the simpler of the two, consisting of a hand operated drum on which was placed a carbon stencil which, when moistened with wood alcohol, was capable of producing about fifty good copies of (literally) purple prose. Teachers tended to like the Banda because corrections could be made simply by typing over the errors. However, it had two malevolent features: the printed copies reeked of the wood alcohol and students liked to pretend that they got high from sniffing it, and the purple carbon dye was powerfully indelible, so that if you were unfortunate enough to brush against a stencil the stain would outlast the item of clothing, as happened to my best cream jacket and my pale grey trousers.

The Gestetner was a much more complicated machine which could print in black ink enough copies to supply an entire year cohort with good copies of an exam paper, so its advantage over the Banda was considerable. However with this advantage came a significant downside. The material to be printed had to be typed onto a stencil of fine, strong paper which needed to be fitted onto a drum which was then rotated, possibly by a handle but usually electrically and, unlike the Banda, that stencil was highly unforgiving of errors. Any mistake had to be painted over with pink correcting fluid (an acetone liquid something like nail polish) which then had to be allowed to dry before it could be typed over. Too many corrections were likely to tear the stencil, requiring the teacher to do it all again.

Before the advent of Clerical Assistants, privileged teachers were given driving lessons on Gestetners but, once a school acquired an Assistant, it became necessary in many schools to wait on that person's convenience before a required document could be run off. In many ways this was good for our pedagogy, as it frequently obliged young teachers who were just finding their way in the classroom to actually plan a week ahead.

Ah, the good old days!

## Contributor details

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Gary spent most of his career teaching in rural New South Wales in either the Riverina or Far North Coast, and was Principal of Camden High from 1995 to 2005. Since retiring he has been an active volunteer in his Rotary Club, his church, a Japan friendship organisation and Meals on Wheels. He has eleven grandchildren scattered around the state, and this keeps him on the move. Two of his children are school principals, and thus he is kept in touch with education matters.